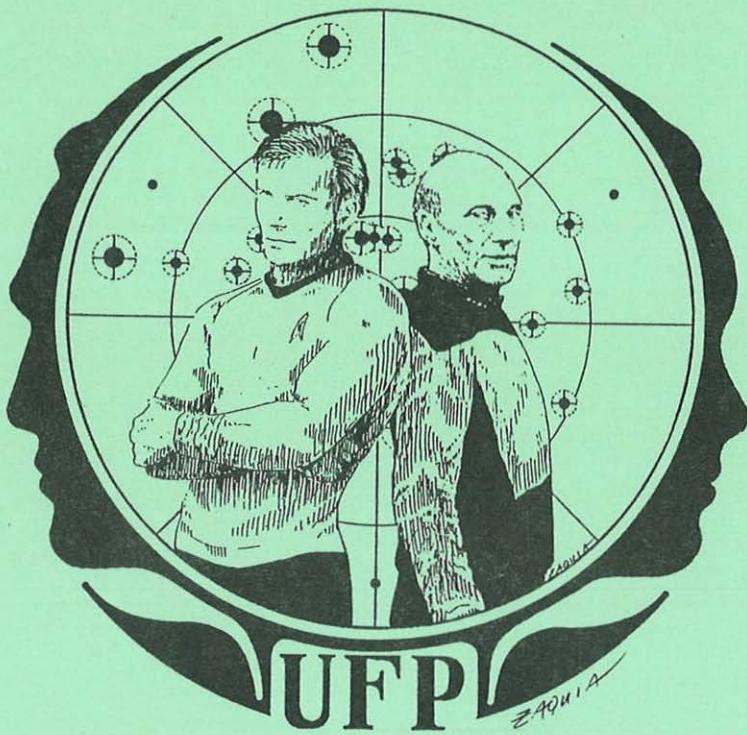


IDIC

IDIC LOG 18

# DREAMS

by RUTH KING



a STAR TREK fanzine

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by

Ruth King

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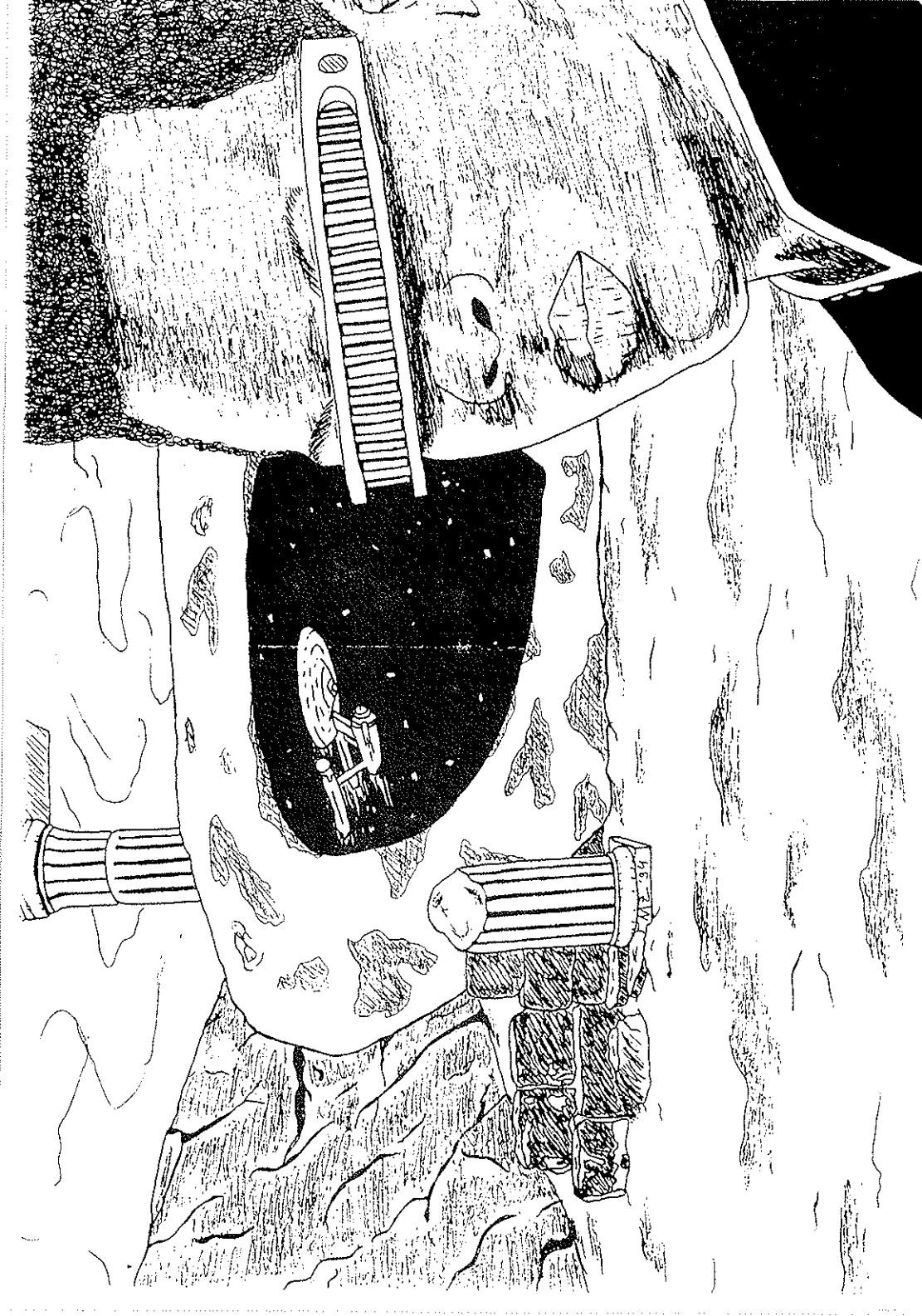
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# DREAMS

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*Captain's Log: Stardate 3151.1: We are currently in orbit around a Class M world known on Federation charts as Nirva 3. The planet, although it appears to have no forms of higher animal life, will be an ideal location for a few days' shore leave.*

Captain James T. Kirk switched off the recording device with a flourish. He did not have to be telepathic to pick up the unmistakable air of excitement which hung over the bridge. It seemed an eternity since his crew had had the chance for a little rest and relaxation. Dr. McCoy had been requesting shore leave for weeks. That was the trouble with serving on the most famous ship in Starfleet. The Admiralty always had some extremely urgent mission to send you on. Kirk's crew was tired, overworked and their efficiency was beginning to be impaired. The Captain settled back in his chair and let his eyes wander around the bridge again. It would be just typical if... Kirk did not manage to complete the thought. Klaxons blared and the bridge was bathed in the bloody glow which signalled the call to General Quarters. Kirk groaned inwardly as he said, "Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan was already scanning the surrounding area. "Six Romulan Warbirds, Captain, uncloaked and bearing directly on our position."

Kirk allowed himself a mild expletive as he watched the bridge crew galvanize themselves into action.

"Shields up. Clear the main phasers for firing. Arm photon torpedoes. Helm, prepare for evasive manoeuvres."

"Aye, sir," the young Ensign at the helm replied.

"Scans indicate that they are raising shields and arming weapons systems," Spock announced.

"Thank you, Uhura, open hailing frequencies," Kirk ordered. "Engineering?"

"Aye, Captain." Scotty's voice came clearly over the intercom.

"Prepare for battle manoeuvres."

"But, Captain..."

"Don't mention the dilithium crystals, Mr. Scott, they'll just have to take the strain, Uhura?"

"Hailing frequencies open, sir, no response," the communications officer announced.

"They've launched photon torpedoes, Captain," Mr. Spock said calmly.

"Evasive," Kirk snapped.

The helm responded smoothly to Kirk's orders. The torpedo exploded harmlessly off the starboard bow, sending a shockwave through the very structure of the ship.

"Freeze program." Wesley Crusher stood from his position at the helm. "Hologram off," he said resignedly.

The bridge of the Enterprise NCC-1701 vanished to reveal the walls of holodeck 4 of the Starship Enterprise

NCC-1701-D. "There's still something wrong with that explosion," Wesley muttered to himself, as he let himself into the programming suite. He sat down at the computer terminal and called up the simulation parameters. The equations flashed across the screen; Wesley watched them, totally absorbed. That was the problem - he'd forgotten to allow for the overall mass of the starship's crew. Producing a simulation of the original Enterprise had been a relatively simple task. Recreating the personalities of the crew had been much more difficult. Wesley could only rely on the way that he interpreted Captain Kirk and the rest of the famous crew from his history lessons. He suspected that legend and reality had become muddled across the years. Still, the period had a fascination for him. Just learning about it in school was not enough. As always, when he wanted to know more, Wesley took his studies outside the classroom. Utilising the holodeck seemed the best way to serve under the legendary James T. Kirk.

Wesley quickly entered his correction factors and made to re-enter the holodeck. Before he could cross the threshold, however, his communicator beeped and his mother's voice echoed forth. "Dr. Crusher to Ensign Crusher. Aren't you supposed to be on duty in two minutes?"

"Okay, Mom, I'm on my way."

Wesley dashed out of the room, heartedly wishing that he could slam the door. He was just glad that his mother had not paged him in front of other people, as she had been known to do. Most of the time having his Mom on board did not bother him unduly; lately, however, she just did the most embarrassing things. Panting a little, Wes ran into his quarters, dragging his gold tunic off as he went, wondering where he'd thrown his uniform.

Unfortunately Beverly Crusher was waiting for him. From the expression on her face he could tell that she was not pleased with him.

"Listen, Mom, I haven't got time for the lecture right now," he said as he dashed past her into his sleeping quarters.

"Wesley, I just want to talk to you... I'll call Captain Picard and tell him that you're going to be a few minutes late."

"No, Mom!" Wes emerged dressed in the correct uniform. "Look, I've gotta go."

"We've got to talk. I just can't understand your attitude to me at the moment."

"I thought you'd like it. I mean, I could be having some real teenage problems."

"Wes!"

Wesley paused. "Mom, I'm sorry, it's just, you know, today." Beverly nodded, trying to smile. "I really have to go or Captain Picard will have me cleaning the bridge with my toothbrush."

Wesley came across and gave her a quick hug before dashing out of the room. He'd not gone twenty paces before he heard a yell from the end of the corridor. Groaning, he stopped, and turned to see Clare Franks running towards him, her blond hair streaming behind her. "Wes!" she shouted. "Wait a minute!"

Despite his mood, Wes managed a smile as she drew level. "Make it quick - I'm supposed to be on duty in exactly thirty seconds."

"Walk you to the turbolift?"

"Okay."

They started off at a fast walk. Clare slipped her arm into Wesley's. "Are you coming to Ten Forward tonight?" she asked as they reached the turbolift. "Paul's got a great idea for a new holodeck simulation, based on the twentieth century moonshots."

"Well, I don't know. Mom and I always..."

"If you don't want to see me, Wes - "

"Look, it's not that!"

"Come along, then."

"Okay, for a short while, but I've got to - "

"Thanks, Wes!"

Clare threw her arms around his neck and kissed him excitedly as the turbolift doors opened, revealing Captain Picard. Wes blushed furiously as he boarded the lift. Picard said nothing. Wesley took several deep breaths, trying to get the colour of his face under control. He always felt that he owed the Captain an apology. There was something about the Captain's precise military bearing that always made Wesley feel incredibly guilty.

Picard glared at the teenager. Although he admired the young man's qualities, the Captain still had to override his extreme discomfort when in the presence of those he considered to be children and there was also so much about Wesley that reminded Picard of Jack Crusher. The presence of the young man who was becoming more and more like his best friend...

The two men arrived on the bridge without breaking the silence.

Commander Riker stood as the Captain strode onto the bridge.

"Captain," Riker acknowledged.

"Everything running smoothly, Number One?"

"The Admiral, sir." Picard closed his eyes for a moment as the Enterprise's latest milk run pushed its way back into his consciousness. Why Starfleet Command had commissioned the Enterprise to transport one Admiral to Vulcan, Picard had yet to fathom. It was a flagrant waste of the Starship's facilities and the Admiral was more trouble than a shipload of Ferengi.

"What is it now, Number One?"

"He wants to come up to the bridge."

"Very well. Mr. Data, escort the Admiral up to the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

The pale-skinned android stood and moved towards the aft lift. Picard let himself sink into the command chair and rested his head briefly in his hands. He'd accompanied the Admiral on an extensive tour of the ship when the man had first come aboard. Picard was not willing to hear the man's complaints and grumbles about the bridge. The noise of the lift doors opening sent a shiver down Picard's spine as did the sound of the Admiral's Southern drawl.

"So this is the bridge then? Lotta space around here, must get a little bit lonely."

Picard turned to see Data help the frail old man down the ramp onto the lower bridge.

"If you would like to sit down, sir," Picard said, gesturing towards the chair normally occupied by Deanna Troi. The Admiral took no notice and wandered towards the viewscreen.

"Well, the view's still the same as it always was," he muttered. "It's the greatest sight, though," he added to Wesley, who was sitting at the con.

"Yes, sir," Wesley replied, glancing up at the Admiral. As their eyes met the expression on the Admiral's face changed. The glazed look he normally affected vanished and his eyes bored sharply into the young man's features. It was as if he was trying to relate the face to the name of someone he knew.

"Wesley Crusher?" he said at last.

"Yes, sir?" Wes answered curiously.

"Well I'll be... So you made it. You know, Jim and I had sleepless nights worrying about you."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think we've ever met. I wasn't around for your last visit, and..."

Wesley glanced around helplessly at Picard. Maybe the Captain thought that this was some kind of joke. The old Admiral was obviously senile.

"And how's your Dad now? You had him worried, you know."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you must have me mixed up with someone else."

"I may be old, son, but I couldn't possibly forget how..."

"Sir, my father died when I was small. I've never really known him," Wes interrupted quietly.

The Admiral's face fell. "I'm sorry, son, I was certain... You just reminded me of someone I knew a long time ago; but you know, old man, my eyes must be playing tricks on me."

"That's quite all right, sir."

Wesley turned back to his control board, acutely aware of the eyes of the bridge crew. He pretended to be deeply interested in his readouts as he felt the Admiral move away. "Was there anything you wanted to see in particular?" Picard asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"No, no, son, I think I'll just go back to my quarters."

Wesley kept his head down as the Admiral left the bridge.

Beverly Crusher sat alone in her quarters. Soft music hung in the air. In her hands was a photograph - a young man, his wife and their child cradled between them. Beverly's eyes were not on the picture, she stared straight ahead, unfocussed.

"Snap out of this, Beverly," she whispered to herself. "It's been years, dammit. Then why do I feel like it happened yesterday? I'm not going to cry! I'm not going to cry..."

A tear dropped, followed by another. Helplessly, Beverly scurried for her handkerchief and blew her nose noisily but before she could indulge in the luxury of her tears the cabin door beeped. She felt like ignoring it but her sense of duty was too strong.

"Come," she managed to say in what passed for a normal tone of voice. The doors slid apart and Captain Picard

entered.

"Doctor," he began briskly, "I don't know if Wesley said anything but we had a little trouble on the bridge..." Picard's voice trailed off as he took in the tears on Beverly's face, the photograph clutched in her hands. "Doctor, are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain, why shouldn't I be?"

"Beverly?"

"Captain, I'm fine. Now what were you saying about Wes?"

"Beverly, you are not fine, by any stretch of the imagination." The Captain sat beside her and took the photograph from her hands.

"Stupid, I know. I wasn't like this last year, or the year before."

"Shall I fetch Deanna?"

"No." Beverly shook her head and made an attempt to smile. "I'll be okay tomorrow, Jean-Luc."

The Captain looked sceptical, but he got to his feet nevertheless, handing the photograph back to the Doctor. He might have said more but Lt Worf's voice echoed across the communication system.

"Captain Picard to the bridge. Message from Starfleet Command, Priority One."

Picard tapped his communicator. "On my way, Mr. Worf. We might be needing you in sickbay, Doctor." The Captain smiled apologetically at Beverly.

"On my way, sir. I'll just take a few minutes to clean up."

"Very good."

Picard left at a fast walk as Beverly moved towards the sleeping area. She was surprised to hear the doors slide open again. "Jean-Luc?" Beverly called out.

"No, Mom, it's me," Wesley answered. *Mom and Captain Picard?* he thought. *Nah!*

"What is it, Wes?" Beverly asked, coming back into the living area. "I thought you had a date?"

"I called it off... Mom, can I talk to you?"

"I've got to get to sickbay. The Captain's just received a Priority One message and he wants us on alert."

Beverly sighed when she saw the hurt look in his eyes. Wes had become so independent in the year she had been away at Starfleet Medical that she sometimes forgot that he still had a lot of growing up to do. It was at times like this, when he really needed her, that she realised that there was a conflict of priorities with her duty to the Enterprise and to her son. She understood why many officers chose career over family. Wesley had obviously had something on his mind for the past few days and if he was volunteering to talk to her she couldn't turn her back on him.

"Okay, Wes, I'm sure sickbay can get along fine without me for a few minutes. Sit down."

Wesley sat on the edge of the couch and looked up at his mother. "Mom, this is going to sound really weird, but I've been having some odd dreams. Well, it's like one recurring nightmare."

"How long has this been going on?"

"About ten days."

"And it's the same dream every night?"

"Yes."

"Okay, can you give me the details?"

Wesley was silent for a moment, "I'm walking down a corridor on Deck 6, close to the transporter room, but there's no one around, which seems a bit odd. The whole area's completely empty. Then I hear voices. Captain Picard comes out of the Transporter Room."

"Yes, go on,"

"There's someone with him, and I wait for this other man to turn round. When he does... it's Dad, with Captain Picard on the Enterprise. I shout to him, but he doesn't hear me. They just carry on down the corridor. Then I wake up. Dad doesn't look like I remember him, he's older, his hair's grey and he has wrinkles..."

"Wes?"

"That's not all. Today, on the bridge, Admiral McCoy recognised me and I've never met him before."

"Surely when he was on board last time?"

"No, I wasn't around."

"Admiral McCoy is an old man - he probably got you mixed up with someone else."

"He seemed pretty sure. He... he also asked after Dad. Mom, I don't think that Dad's dead."

Beverly looked at her son in horror. She'd really thought that Wesley had finally accepted his father's death, but his

eyes told a different story. Quite frankly, Beverly was worried. If it had been anyone else she would have had them report to Deanna Troi for a full psychiatric evaluation. But Wesley? He had always been a remarkably level-headed young man. Even as a child nothing had seemed to phase him for long. She had sometimes wished that Wesley was a 'normal teenager'. *Well, you shouldn't make too many wishes,* Beverly told herself, *you may get what you ask for.*

"It sounds crazy, right?" Wesley laughed. "Crusher finally cracks under the pressure."

"Look, maybe you should go and talk to Deanna."

"Yeah, maybe I should."

Wesley stood up with a smile, and left the room. He was beginning to think that he'd made a mistake telling his mother. He'd seen the look in her eyes; she was obviously frightened. Wesley made his way slowly back to his quarters, wishing he'd said nothing. The dreams alone had disturbed him enough, but when McCoy had spoken to him on the bridge... There had to be a way to confirm what the old man had said. McCoy had mentioned *Jim*, presumably James T. Kirk. Maybe it would be possible to contact the Starfleet hero? Wesley shook his head. Why would Kirk talk to him, even if he knew the man's present location? Anyway it was too late to do anything about it tonight. He needed sleep, and badly. Wes shuddered - he'd only managed a few hours over the past week. For once he hoped that Captain Picard's message would not put the whole ship on alert, resulting in a frantic call to the bridge. *Let someone else save the ship tonight,* he thought to himself as he let himself into his quarters. Not bothering to undress, Wes threw himself onto his bed, flinging an arm across his

face.

Captain Picard arrived on the bridge, the model of a calm, collected Captain, making Will Riker smile. He wondered idly what the Captain had been doing when he received the call to the bridge. Somehow he couldn't picture Picard rushing onto the turbolift without his shirt on, or only one boot.

"Mr. Worf, I'll take the call in my Ready Room," the Captain said as he strode down the ramp onto the lower bridge.

"Aye, sir," the Klingon answered, making the necessary adjustments.

Captain Picard sat at his desk and opened the communications channel. The face of a Starfleet Admiral appeared on the screen. Admiral Edwards, one of the oldest Admirals in Starfleet. Edwards' species, although basically humanoid, had a much longer lifespan than a Human. The man's sharp features broke into a grin when he saw Picard.

"Captain Picard. How are you?"

"Very well, Admiral."

Social pleasantries out of the way, the smile faded from the Admiral's face. "We're going to have to divert you. You've a passenger to pick up from planet J9-36. This is top secret. No one must see or interact with this person apart from yourself."

"Can I inform my First Officer?"

"Certainly. Now, your passenger will give you new orders."

"What about our present mission?"

"You should be able to complete it after the pick up. Any more questions?"

"No, Admiral."

"Good, I'll let you carry on then. Good luck, Captain."

Captain Picard stared at the blank screen. Missions of top priority were not unusual, the flagship of the Federation was always in demand. Secret missions made his skin crawl, especially secret missions where he couldn't let his crew know what was going on. He acknowledged that his crew trusted him implicitly, but that trust must have a breaking point. How could he expect his officers to rely on their Captain's judgement if they didn't know what the hell was going on? Starfleet Command had not stressed the importance of the mission. Then, again, they didn't have to. Well, there was nothing for it, he was going to have to inform the bridge crew of the course change at some time and it might as well be now. Rising, Picard pulled down the front of his uniform and made his way to the bridge.

Wesley Crusher awoke with a start. He looked at the timepiece beside his bed and groaned. He'd only been asleep for just over an hour. Realising that he probably wouldn't get any more sleep tonight he decided to get up. He pulled off his uniform and stepped into the shower, trying to wash away the remnants of his nightmare. After drying himself he found some off duty clothes and got dressed again. He sat at his desk and activated his computer terminal. If he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight he might as well get his assignments done. He had a choice, English literature, process science or history. Reluctantly he turned to the history.

"Answer, in not more than 10,000 words, the question, was James T. Kirk a good captain?" Wes read the question out loud, then he groaned. Essay writing was not his strong point, which meant that he had to work slightly harder on an essay than he did at everything else. Needless to say his average grade was still an A. Pacing around his cabin, Wesley started to dictate to his computer.

"James T. Kirk was Captain of the Enterprise between Stardates...."

No sooner had Wesley got the first sentence out of his mouth than the door chime sounded.

"If that's Mom..." Wes muttered. "Come in."

The door slid open and Paul Mason bounced through, "Yo, Wes, where were you tonight?" he asked.

Wesley sighed inwardly. He and Paul had been friends for some years, since they'd arrived on the Enterprise. Unfortunately Paul was one of those rare individuals blessed with a boundless store of energy. Privately, Wesley believed that Paul didn't actually sleep.

"So what happened?" Paul asked.

"I had some things to do," Wes answered lamely.

"Well, Clare was really annoyed."

"I explained."

"I don't think she thought much of your explanation."

"Why?"

"She left with Dave."

"What! The guy's a complete

moron."

"You know that and I know that."

"Another relationship down the tube."

"Look, she'll soon realise what a dork Dave is and come scurrying back. Anyway, to important matters. Are you still on for the ski trip next week?"

"Yeah, assuming we don't get attacked by the Romulans or something."

"Quit being depressing, Wes. Have you started your essay yet?"

"Just begun."

"I'd better let you get on with it so you can help me later. Who knows, I might just hand this one in on time."

"Some chance."

"You're probably right. I'll see you for practice tomorrow."

"Okay."

Paul left and Wes sank into a chair, wondering why he always felt so exhausted after a ten minute conversation with Paul. He was only slightly upset by the news about Clare. He really hadn't had time to see her recently so break-up had been on the cards. Wesley felt that he more important problems right now. It was no good, he was going to have to take his mother's advice and seek help from the Ship's Counselor. It was either that or be driven completely insane.

The decor in Counselor Troi's consultation room was designed to help people relax. Wesley Crusher was anything but. He paced the room like a

caged animal. Deanna watched him and just listened to his story. The tension emanating from the young man was obvious even to a non-empath. He was clearly agitated by his nightmares. Not unusual, given their content, but Deanna was sure that something else had sparked off his present condition.

"Wesley, sit down." Deanna said when Wes had finished speaking, he reluctantly sat opposite her.

"Now what exactly is this about?" she asked.

"I just told you!" Wesley protested.

"No, all you've told me about is the content of these dreams you've been having. What prompted you to come and see me?"

"Admiral McCoy. He recognised me on the bridge yesterday and I've never met him before. He also spoke about Dad. He knows me, he knows Dad and I don't understand how. Dreams I can cope with, but..."

"When dreams become reality?"

"Deanna, do you think I'm cracking up?"

"Of course not. Wesley, you've just been having some weird dreams, which is not unusual considering the pressure you've been under. Starfleet exams, maintaining your schoolwork, carrying out your duties, that and the fact that this is the anniversary of your father's death. Your dreams do have a logical source and I'm sure they'll stop soon. In the meantime, I suggest that you try to relax a little bit more."

"And Admiral McCoy?"

"He's an old man, Wesley. It is

possible that he knew your father - after all he did teach at the Academy for some years."

"Yeah, I guess so. I'd better go, I'm due on duty soon."

"And Wesley, don't worry."

Wes managed a weak smile as he left.

"So, Number One, that's the situation. We've got to pick up this passenger then he'll give us our new orders," Captain Picard told his First Officer.

"And we have no other information?" Riker asked.

"Nothing at all. Admiral Edwards was very brief."

Captain Picard rose and moved towards the food dispenser. "Tea, Number One?"

"Coffee, sir."

"So we'll be taking the Enterprise into a completely unknown situation."

"And you're the only person who's supposed to interact with this passenger?"

"Yes."

"It all seems a bit fishy to me, sir."

Captain Picard nodded, glad that his First Officer agreed with his own diagnosis of the situation. Riker's candid observations often mirrored his own thoughts, thoughts that as Captain he could never express.

"I want to put him in guest quarters on Deck 6," Picard continued. "I think that it would be wise to clear the entire section. Relocate all crew and families to empty quarters on Decks 9, 11 and 35."

"I'll assign Counselor Troi."

"Very good. Get Mr. La Forge to adjust the turbolifts. I don't want them stopping in Section 9, unless it's on my command."

"How about Jefferies tubes and emergency walkways? We could rig forcefields."

"Make it so."

Riker nodded and made his way to the door just as Counselor Troi entered. Riker acknowledged her presence and left. Counselor Troi appeared to be highly agitated.

"Captain, may I have a word?" she asked as soon as the door had closed.

"Certainly, Counselor," Picard replied taking a sip of his tea.

"I've just had the most disturbing interview with Ensign Crusher, and I think it's worth bringing to your attention."

"You feel that there's something seriously wrong with Wesley?"

"Yes, Captain. Wesley has been having some very disturbing dreams."

"Dreams? Counselor, I fail to see...?"

"Dreams about his father, and after the incident on the bridge yesterday... The point is, Wesley Crusher has convinced himself that his father is still alive."

Although Picard's expression did not change, Deanna felt the pain wash over her. Steeling herself, she continued, "I think that Wesley is developing a definite psychological problem."

"Cause?"

"Stress, overwork. Wes has been studying hard for his Starfleet exams on top of his normal duties. He also tries to spend a great deal of time with people his own age. Wesley has a great desire to please; this leads to a tendency to take on too many responsibilities. Couple this with the normal emotional traumas and hormonal changes of Humans his age..."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Captain, I think that Ensign Crusher is heading for an emotional breakdown."

The Captain stood slowly and walked over to the observation window, staring out at the distorted stars. He took another sip of his tea. He found it difficult to believe that there was something wrong with Wesley, never mind mental instability. Wes was a cheerful, even-tempered young man who had remarkable talents. He had never flaunted his intelligence and he seemed to have a great many friends among the passengers and crew. Picard admitted that Wesley must have been affected by the things that he had experienced, but this seemed to improve the boy. The Captain smiled when he remembered how precocious Wesley had been a couple of years ago. But reminiscing was not going to solve his present problem.

"Have you a suggested course of action?" he said eventually.

"I'm going to recommend that Ensign Crusher be removed from duty," Deanna answered firmly.

"Relieved from duty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Counselor, do you have any idea what effect that would have on the boy?"

"I'm more concerned with the safety of the Enterprise. Wesley is in a position where he could make a very serious mistake."

"He will see it as some kind of punishment."

"I'm sure that he will understand if you explain it to him."

"I'll think about it." Picard sighed.

Deanna nodded and left. Picard activated his communicator. "Mr. Crusher, what is our ETA on J9-36?"

"Fourteen hours at Warp 5, sir."

Fourteen hours until Picard could find out why the Enterprise was being sent on what could turn out to be the biggest wild goose chase of all time. The last thing he wanted was the problem which Counselor Troi had unceremoniously dumped in his lap. Picard felt a headache start to throb in his temples. It was definitely time for the Captain of the Enterprise to get some rest.

J9-36 was a barren world. It was home to a variety of low plant life, lichen and such. It had no surface water to speak of and the atmosphere was just breathable. In fact it was more inhospitable than Vulcan, without the Vulcans. The planet was also swept with dust storms and was exposed to violent tectonic upheavals. The Enterprise swung into a low orbit as Picard strode onto the bridge.

"Report, Number One," Picard said, seating himself.

"Standard orbit achieved, Captain. The sensors register one life form," Riker replied.

"Human?"

"Seems to be. Although our sensors are being affected by the strong magnetic field around the planet."

"Prepare to beam him up. I'll be in Transporter Room 3."

"Aye, sir."

As Captain Picard left the bridge he felt the apprehension of his crew. He felt no less apprehensive himself as he made the short trip down to Deck 6. Arriving at the Transporter Room he dismissed the transporter chief. Feeling a little out of place, Picard operated the controls and gazed expectantly at the figure forming on the platform. Before the man had fully materialised recognition hit Picard like a physical blow. The man was of medium height with dark brown hair which was greying at the temples. His friendly, open face was smiling. The smile faded as he recognised the man standing behind the transporter controls.

"Good Lord, Jean-Luc," the man said, "I'm sorry they sent you."

The man started to step off of the platform and cross the room towards Picard. The Captain backed away slightly, unwilling to accept what his senses were telling him.

The man stopped. "It's me, Jean-Luc, you're not imagining things."

"Jack?"

"Dammit, why did Starfleet have to

send you?"

"Jack?"

Picard started forward, grabbing his friend by the shoulders, touching the man to confirm his physical reality. This was definitely Jack Crusher, the man whose body Picard had brought home to a grieving wife.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely. "I saw your body, I brought it home to Beverly."

"I know, Jean-Luc, I know. I'll explain later."

"And to Beverly and Wesley?"

"Are they on the ship too?"

"Yes, Beverly's my Chief Medical Officer and Wesley's..."

"I don't want them to know."

"Why?"

"This mission. . . I probably won't return. I've already caused them enough pain."

"Can you tell me what this mission is about?" Picard moved away from Crusher, surprise rapidly giving way to fierce anger. He walked out of the transporter room, gesturing for Crusher to follow.

"I'll tell you," Jack nodded, "but I'll need access to the ship's computers."

"Very well. There's a terminal in your quarters."

The corridors felt strangely quiet as Picard escorted Jack Crusher to the guest quarters. Picard seriously began to wonder if the man walking beside him

wasn't the product of a deranged imagination. Jack Crusher was dead - a fact which the Captain had never quite managed to accept. He knew damn well that Beverly Crusher never had. If Dr. Crusher had been able to come to terms with Jack's death then maybe their 'Just good friends' relationship would have got a little further. Picard stopped himself in mid-thought. With Jack Crusher returned from the grave it was no time be thinking about getting involved with his wife.

Admiral McCoy (retired) was enjoying his afternoon nap in the pleasant company of a glass of Saurian Brandy. He knew that modern Starfleet officers preferred synthetohol but McCoy had never managed to develop a taste for it. What was the point of drinking if you weren't going to suffer for it? It was a bit like drinking decaffeinated coffee or caffeine-free diet Coke. McCoy liked being old. He could afford to be crotchety without anyone complaining. All the habits that he'd picked up in his younger days were deemed to be acceptable now he was 139. He was also very fond of the new Enterprise, not that he'd ever let on. That's why he had pulled several diplomatic strings to get the Enterprise assigned to transport him to the medical conference on Vulcan. With luck he'd get a chance to pay a call on Mr. Spock. There was nothing like a little Spock baiting to make one feel twenty years younger. In fact it might be a good idea to give him a call - or should he leave his arrival as a surprise? McCoy lost the argument with himself and opened the comm. channel. He had things to discuss with Spock anyway. Seeing that young man on the bridge had brought back some long-suppressed memories.

McCoy only had to wait a few seconds before Spock's spare features appeared on the viewscreen. Spock

raised an eyebrow as he recognised the caller.

"Dr. McCoy," Spock said, "how very nice to see you again. You do realise that it is the middle of the night in this part of Vulcan?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Spock." McCoy grinned.

"However, I was not asleep so there is no need to apologise."

"You don't change, Spock."

"Did you expect me to?"

"Well I thought that you might have developed a sense of humour."

"Despite being exposed to yours for so many years I seem to be immune. A fact for which I am most grateful. Now what do you wish to discuss?"

"To the point as always, Spock."

"I presume that you did not call just to insult me?"

"Me, Spock? You know that I am on my way to Vulcan?"

"I had received a message warning me of the fact."

"Guess who I saw on the bridge?"

"I do not have time for games, Doctor, and since I presume that you will tell me eventually..."

"You're no fun these days, Spock."

"Doctor..."

"Okay, okay."

"Dr McCoy..."

"Wes Crusher!"

"Fascinating."

"Strange thing was, he didn't seem to recognise me."

"It is possible that, in his personal timeline, the events have not yet occurred. You must not speak to him about what happened on NCC-1701."

"I might have let something slip."

"May I remind you that any information that Wesley obtains about his future may influence past events."

"I was just pleased to see him, Spock, something that you wouldn't understand. Anyway I don't think that he twigged, he just thought it was the ramblings of a senile old man."

"A logical deduction. However, anyone who has known you previously will realise that you have always rambled."

"I don't think that we've got anything to worry about."

"Possibly, but it is vital that you have no further contact."

"Okay, Spock, but knowing that young man he's likely to come and find me."

"If he does the solution is simple."

"I know. I'm sure that I can think up something to keep him satisfied."

"Enterprise NCC-1701, James T. Kirk commanding," Jack Crusher said. "Stardate 5027.4. The Enterprise had just stolen the Romulan cloaking device."

"I am aware of the story," Picard said.

"If you remember, the device was hooked into the Enterprise's shields - "

"The event is well documented."

"Haven't you ever wondered why the Romulans didn't try to get the device back, and what would have been the impact on history if the Enterprise had been destroyed? The Federation would not have had any information about the cloaking device, they might not have known for sure that the Romulans had that technology. Can you imagine how much damage they could do?"

"Certainly, but - "

"Wait, let me finish. Starfleet classified the reference, but the Romulans attempted to sabotage the Enterprise when she was at Starbase 16 having the cloaking device removed."

"This is an interesting history lesson, Jack, but what has all this got to do with you?"

"Just before this incident, the Enterprise picked up new crew members at Starbase 3. Among them was a Lt John Crusher. Look at his biological profile, Jean-Luc, and compare it with mine."

Picard examined the readouts on the computer screen. He had to agree that they were identical - fingerprints, retina scans, everything. Assuming that the records had not been falsified there was no doubt that the two men described were the same person. If Jack Crusher was pivotal to the past then it made some kind of perverse sense that Starfleet would take measures to protect the man. But to tear him away from his home, his family? To go to the trouble of staging the man's death? Picard wanted to believe

it, but somehow his mind refused to accept the fact that Jack Crusher was alive and apparently well.

"What has this got to do with my ship?" Picard asked.

"It's the Enterprise's mission to take me back."

"Slingshot?"

"No, the Guardian of Forever."

Wesley Crusher let himself into his quarters and slumped into the nearest chair. He quickly shot up again at the protesting yowl which echoed from his pet cat. Wes smiled as he picked her up and sat her on his lap. She purred as he tickled her under the chin. The two year old ginger female had belonged to Wes ever since she was a kitten. In fact she'd turned up just after Wes had moved into his own quarters. She was very little trouble, apart from a tendency to sleep on his homework and his dress uniform. She also had the unfortunate habit of following him about. Luckily she'd only gone up to the bridge once and Captain Picard had never found out where the cat hairs had come from. Under the influence of the soft noise, Wesley's eyes began to close, but some part of his brain refused to let him sleep. He was finally prevented from dropping off by the chime of the door signal.

"Come in," he said, dumping his cat unceremoniously on the floor. Beverly Crusher entered, a slightly apologetic smile on her face. She frowned in concern when she regarded her son; he looked even worse than he had done when he had come to her quarters.

"Still not sleeping?" she asked.

"No." Wesley shook his head. "I get a couple of hours a night if I'm lucky."

"Same dreams?"

"I don't know any more. I just wake up without remembering."

Beverly took out her tricorder and ran the scanner over Wesley.

"If you spend much more time awake your body's going to shut down."

"Mom, I've tried everything to get myself to sleep - hot drinks, cutting out coffee, counting sheep. I even tried to read one of Captain Picard's philosophy books."

"Did it work?"

"Actually it was quite interesting. Did you know that -"

"Wesley!"

"Sorry."

"Look, there's no alternative, I'm going to have to give you a sedative. You're going to get some sleep tonight, okay?"

"Okay."

Beverly pulled the hypospray out of her medical case and gestured towards the sleeping area. Surprisingly, Wesley went without another word.

"Just relax," she said as Wesley lay down. The hypospray emitted a low hiss as the drug was injected into his system.

"Mom," Wes mumbled, as the sedative started to take effect.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when I was

little, just after Dad died, you used to hold me until I went to sleep?"

"Yes, I remember."

Beverly Crusher gathered her son in her arms and held him tight.

As the twenty-four hour cycle about which the Enterprise's day revolved reached ship's night, Ten Forward began to fill up. The Hostess, an enigmatic being known as Guinan, wove her way through the mass of people, her sharp ears picking up snatches of conversation from a dozen different locations.

"I saw this film once about these space hoppers..."

"...then I decided to have a beef sandwich..."

"I'll never put my tent up drunk again..."

"...prawns and mango chutney..."

"This one's got chains..."

"Luckily it was a stunt, Felicity..."

"Mr. Jones came home..."

Guinan was possibly the only being on the ship who was able to interact with the crew on a purely social basis. Ten Forward was a happy mix of Starfleet officers, crewmen and civilians. She felt somewhat surprised when she looked up and saw Captain Picard entering the bar - he normally avoided the area at the more popular hours. Guinan quickly served the drinks that she was carrying and made her way over to the Captain.

"Can I get you something?" she asked

"Guinan, may I have a word?" the Captain said.

Guinan nodded and led the Captain through to her office. "What can I help you with?"

"I have a conflict, Guinan, between my duty to Starfleet and to my crew."

"Crew?"

"Well, certain members of my crew."

"Really?"

"All right, then - Wesley and Beverly Crusher."

"I take it that this has something to do with the evacuation of sections of Deck 6."

"Right. Damn secrecy."

"And Starfleet orders prevent you from telling them?"

"I don't know if it'll hurt them more if I tell them or if I don't."

"I think that whatever you do you are going to cause Beverly and Wesley Crusher pain."

"So I should just follow my orders?"

"You never intended not to."

"I know, but even a Captain needs to be told that he's made the right decision. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Captain."

Picard smiled and left. He always felt comfortable talking to Guinan. Counselor Troi unnerved him a little - he did not like the feeling that those big

brown eyes could see directly into his soul. When Picard was alone in the corridor he crossed to the comm panel and spoke to the computer.

"Computer, tell me the location of Dr. Crusher."

"Dr. Crusher is in section 10, crew quarters."

Picard made his way to the turbolift and sent it down to Deck 10. He knew that he had to rationalise his decision by talking to Beverly Crusher. He also had the unpleasant task of removing Wesley Crusher from duty. If nothing else it should give Wes something else to worry about apart from the passenger on Deck 6 and stop the boy's inquisitive nature running free.

The crew quarters were not as luxurious as those assigned to senior officers, but they were a great improvement on the ones that Picard had inhabited during his years as an ensign. Thinking about some of the room-mates he'd had to endure still made him shudder. At least present day ensigns were assigned single quarters if they so wished. There seemed to be a large number of crew members around, surprised at seeing their Captain on the crew decks. Picard was not the type of Captain who fraternised with his crew. Some made the mistake that this made him less aware of what was going on on his ship.

On reaching Wesley's quarters, the Captain pulled down the front of his uniform and depressed the call signal. He was slightly surprised to hear Beverly Crusher's voice reply as the doors slid open.

"Doctor?" he called, entering the darkened room.



"In here, Captain," Dr. Crusher replied.

The Captain made his way slowly through the darkness to the sleeping area, where a soft light shone. Beverly Crusher was sitting on the bed, holding a sleeping Wesley in her arms.

"I finally had to give him a sedative," she explained.

"Doctor, may I have a word?"

Beverly nodded and gently released Wesley. The boy did not stir as she moved away.

"As a physician, how would you rate your son's condition?" Picard asked when they were both seated in the adjoining room.

"I just don't know," Beverly admitted.

"Counselor Troi came to see me a few days ago and recommended that I relieve Wesley of his duties."

"You're the Captain, but I don't think that you'll be doing him any favours."

"That was my initial feeling."

"I can't help thinking that all this is my fault," she said thoughtfully.

"In what way?"

"Well, since Jack died I've never let myself become close to another man. Maybe if I'd got married again, given Wesley someone to replace his father..."

"No good will come of blaming yourself, Doctor."

"Jean-Luc..."

"Yes?"

Beverly Crusher stood and walked away from him. Her voice sounded a little unsteady as it floated back over her shoulder. "Jean-Luc, there's something I've been meaning to say to you for some time now..."

Beverly was cut off, to the Captain's relief, by a scream from the adjoining room. She did not spare the Captain another glance as she ran into the sleeping area. Due to the effects of the sedative Wesley was still asleep, but he was obviously in the grip of a terrible nightmare.

"I'm going to have to snap him out of it," Beverly said as she reloaded her hypospray.

"Can't you give him some kind of dream suppressant?"

"It's too dangerous at the moment."

As soon as the stimulant hit his system Wesley sat upright, his eyes snapping open. It took him several seconds to realise where he was, and to take in the presence of his mother and Captain Picard.

"I guess that didn't improve things?" Beverly whispered.

"It didn't stop the dreams, Mom." Wesley shook his head.

"Wesley," Picard said. "Counselor Troi came to see me - "

"I know what you're going to say, Captain, but I'll save you the trouble." Wes got out of bed and stood to attention in front of Picard. "Ensign Crusher requesting to be relieved of duty, sir."

"Very well. At your own request I

relieve you of your duties for two weeks, on the recommendation of the Chief Medical Officer and the Ship's Counselor."

"Thank you, sir."

Picard smiled and placed his hand on Wesley's shoulder before leaving. Beverly gave her son a quick hug and followed the Captain.

"Captain!" she shouted after him.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"I didn't finish what I was saying."

"Later, Doctor. There's someone I have to see."

Beverly Crusher hit the wall in frustration as she watched Picard stride away from her. *How many times have you tried to tell him?* she asked herself. *I guess some things just aren't meant to be.*

She was still standing in the corridor when Wesley emerged from his quarters. Dressed in a sweater and jeans, he was obviously planning to go somewhere.

"And where do you think you are off to?" Dr. Crusher, arms folded, blocked her son's path.

"I promised to go and see Paul," he protested.

"It's late, Wes."

"Mom, we've got an essay due tomorrow and I promised to give him a hand."

"And it hadn't crossed your mind that he might be asleep?"

"I've already called him."

"I want you in sickbay. There are some tests that I want to run."

"I'll come up tomorrow morning."

"Wesley, you've had less than fifteen hours sleep over the past ten days; as a result you are under considerable psychological stress and you've been relieved of duty. As Chief Medical Officer I'm required to find out why. As your mother, I'm worried about you."

Wesley was silent, his features becoming sullen.

"I'll make that an order, Mr. Crusher," Beverly continued

"Mom, I promise to be in sickbay first thing tomorrow morning but right now I need to talk to someone who isn't a Ship's Counselor... or mother. I'm sorry, but..."

"It's okay, Wes, I understand. First thing tomorrow morning - okay."

"I promise. Mom, have I ever told you how wonderful you are?"

"Not recently."

Wesley grinned and hugged his mother tightly - a gesture which drew stares from passing crew members. He then walked away in the direction of the turbolift. Watching him go Beverly suddenly became aware of a ginger tail trotting at high speed away from her.

"No, you don't," Beverly said, making a grab for, and successfully catching, the animal. The cat made a protesting noise as she was firmly taken back to Wesley's quarters.

Jack Crusher stood by the

observation windows which dominated his quarters. "Come in," he said absently as the door signalled Picard's presence.

"You've read the logs?" Crusher asked.

"Intriguing, to say the least," Picard said. "A time portal?"

"You can imagine why Starfleet has kept all knowledge of it under strict control."

"Certainly; but can we control this power?"

"I don't know, Jean-Luc, but the fact remains that I need to be on Starbase 3 a hundred years ago. Starfleet remains adamant that this is the best way to get me there. The slingshot theory is well documented but hardly accurate. The times it has worked have been flukes."

"One question, Jack."

"Of course."

"Why send you back now? Why didn't they send you back directly after your 'death'?"

"The sabotage attempt was made by Romulans from our time zone. Starfleet has been waiting for them to make their move before bringing about my... resurrection."

"Dammit, Jack, I saw you buried! I brought your body home. I just can't accept that you are standing here in front of me."

"How can I prove it to you? My name is Jack Crusher, service number 785alpha893beta. I served under you for five years aboard the Stargazer. I have a wife called Beverly and a son called Wesley, who must be seventeen by now;

look, here's a photo. It was taken on Wes' second birthday."

Jack pulled out a crumpled photo and thrust it into Picard's hands. Crusher sank into a chair, his head resting in his hands. When he looked up Picard was suddenly struck by the expression in the man's eyes. It reminded him strongly of the way Wesley had looked when he had requested that Picard remove him from duty. The Captain handed the photograph back to Crusher without looking at it.

"We'll be starting in three hours. Battle section only - no sense in having more people involved than is absolutely necessary. I've assigned minimum crew, just bridge officers and engineering."

"Beverly and Wesley?"

"They'll remain on the saucer section which will proceed to Vulcan."

"Good."

"I'll come and escort you to the Battle section at 0300."

"I'll be ready."

Picard left his friend's quarters hastily. Waiting for him in the corridor stood Deanna Troi.

"Well, Counselor?" he asked.

"Whoever is in that room was experiencing great emotional stress while you were questioning him. You obviously triggered some very painful memories."

"But was he telling the truth?"

"As far as I could tell, yes."

"Thank you, Counselor, that's all I

wanted to know."

"James Kirk had a love for his ship which transcended simple pride in his command and almost achieved a sexual status. His success as a Starship Captain and many of his actions have been attributed to a man protecting his lover..." Wes, where do you get these ideas from?" Paul asked.

"I thought that it was pretty obvious from the notes, if you'd bothered to read them," Wes answered.

The two young men were seated in a corner of an empty Ten Forward. At almost 0300 hours, ship's time, most people had left the lounge. Guinan was still hovering around but she left them to themselves. Wes glanced at his watch and groaned; they'd been working for almost three hours. It had taken Wesley almost that long to persuade Paul not to write an essay on why Kirk was a bad Captain just to be different.

"Wesley, it's boring," Paul continued.

"You say that everything is boring," Wes reminded him.

"Look, it's not my fault that I have a very low boredom threshold. It's probably genetic."

"Your parents are plasma physicists."

"Exactly my point. That is a very dull subject, whatever you might say."

"Is there any point in going on with this?"

"I guess not. You'll get an A and I'll get a C as normal. Assuming I manage to

hand it in on time."

"Just think - another year and you'll never have to look at another textbook."

"Yeah, but then I'll have to have a career, Wes! I suppose I could take over here when Guinan retires."

"I'll get the Captain to give you a call in a couple of hundred years," Guinan interjected as she cleared the glasses from their table. "Do you two want anything else?"

"A chocolate sundae, please," Paul replied.

"Wes?"

"No, nothing for me, thanks," Wesley said.

"You haven't had anything all night," Paul said. "Are you feeling okay?"

Paul sounded vaguely astonished. Wesley's passion for ice cream was well known throughout the ship. It was a childhood obsession which he'd never felt the need to grow out of. Paul looked at Wes sharply, taking in for the first time his friend's dishevelled appearance.

"Wes - are you okay?" he asked again.

"Sure."

"Wes, this is me you're talking to, not your mother."

"I'm fine."

"Look I know you must be upset about Clare - "

"It's not that."

"I mean, if my girlfriend went off

with a guy who's got tofu for brains - "

"Paul, right now I wouldn't care if she started seeing a Denebian slime worm."

"Wes?"

"I've gotta go."

Wesley stood and started to make his way out of the bar but Paul grabbed his arm. "Has this got anything to do with you being taken off duty?"

Wes groaned and sank back into his chair. He ought to have known that the whole ship would be buzzing with that particular piece of gossip. "It's not just that," Wesley admitted.

"You've been cranky now for a couple of weeks," Paul observed.

"I feel like I'm going insane."

The conversation was interrupted by a whistle from the communication system and Captain Picard's voice echoed throughout the ship.

"All passengers and crew prepare for emergency saucer separation. Mr. Worf, Mr. Allanby and Mr. Data report to the bridge, Mr. La Forge to Engineering. Remaining personnel gather in the saucer section."

Wesley leapt up and dashed towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Paul yelled after him.

"To the battle section."

"Wes? Guinan, aren't you going to do something?" Paul demanded of the hostess.

"I don't think so." Guinan shook her head. "In fact I think that we had better keep quiet about Wesley."

"What?"

"Believe me, Wes has got very good reasons for going down to the battle section and it's vital that he gets there. So sit down, eat your ice cream and forget you ever saw Wesley Crusher tonight."

**"Captain's Log Stardate 44943.9;**  
After a journey of three days at Warp 9 the Enterprise has arrived at the planet which is home to the Guardian of Forever. According to the logs from the old Enterprise, the time portal is capable of transporting people back into the past. The location of this planet has been one of the most closely guarded secrets in Starfleet for the past eighty years. Starfleet Command has not even permitted a garrison to be posted there to guard our past; the risk is too great."

**"Personal Log;** I have my doubts about letting anyone tamper with history. The evidence, however, seems to indicate that in this case it is necessary. Jack Crusher was present on the original Enterprise and was instrumental in foiling the Romulan plot."

Picard turned off the recording device, and regarded with some trepidation the planet which was growing on the viewscreen. If the logs from the old Enterprise were correct they should be running into waves of time distortion. As if on cue the ship shuddered, slightly at first, followed by more violent convulsions.

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Allanby," the Captain said. "Try to plot us a standard orbit."

"Aye, sir," the Ensign replied from the con position.

"You have the bridge, Mr. Data," Picard announced, rising from his command chair. He managed to keep his feet as he made his way to the turbolift across the shaking deck. "Conference room 2," he said and the lift sprung into life. Two minutes later he arrived at the conference room.

"Well, Jack, we've arrived," Picard said.

"I'll prepare to beam down," the other man replied, his features grim.

"Jack, is there something wrong?"

"I'm just saying goodbye to all of this again. So many years spent on that godforsaken planet."

"You won't be coming back, will you?"

"No - at least, I don't think so. Starfleet hasn't let me know my own future. I don't know if Jack Crusher leaves the Enterprise, gets killed or..."

"If you return, what will you do?"

"I don't know, Jean-Luc. I just don't know."

Geordi La Forge swore loudly as he was forced to make another alteration to the impulse engines and reroute another circuit. Since he was the only person in Engineering he felt that he was able to vocalise his complaints. He fervently hoped that they weren't going to stay in

orbit around the planet for too long - he could almost feel the Enterprise shaking apart around him.

In the best tradition of all chief engineers, Geordi considered the Enterprise to be his own personal property. The Captain had other ideas but Geordi left him secure in the happy delusion. Basically, no one knew a ship like the chief engineer; it gave him a wonderful feeling of power to know that at the touch of a switch he could plunge everyone into darkness or cut off the oxygen supply. For the safety of everyone on board it was lucky that he had a stable personality.

The readouts fluctuated wildly as the ship was knocked about once more. This time Geordi did not keep his remarks to himself; activating his communicator he spoke to the bridge.

"Bridge, this is Engineering."

"Yes, Commander," Data's precise tones replied.

"I'm having real trouble holding her together down here, Data. Permission to transfer Engineering to the bridge. I think I need to co-ordinate with helm control just to keep the impulse engines together. I might need to run a level two diagnostic."

"Permission granted."

"On my way."

Geordi left Engineering at a run. As soon as he had vacated the room a shadow detached itself from the upper level around the reactor core. Wesley Crusher moved quickly to the ladder and slid down. He stretched, working out the cramps in his muscles that had been caused by crouching in one position for several hours. Still massaging one

shoulder he glanced at the readouts on the main engineering display. Something was causing them to fluctuate wildly. Every time they did so the Enterprise was knocked around. Wes sincerely hoped that the crew was going to be too busy to notice his illicit use of the computer.

"Computer, analyse the turbulence affecting the Enterprise," Wesley ordered.

"Sensors do not indicate any known phenomenon."

"Speculate."

"Insufficient data."

"This can't be right," Wes muttered to himself.

The readouts showed the presence of what looked like time distortions, and on a massive scale. The Enterprise was running through them like a ship on storm-tossed seas. Why couldn't the computer see that? Why was it refusing to analyse the situation?

"Computer, list corresponding phenomena."

"Cannot concur."

"Cannot or will not?"

"Enterprise records do not contain any information."

"Shit!" Wes swore, then looked around guiltily before he realised that no one was around to hear him. Bringing up a schematic of the waveform on the monitor he started to run through calculations in his head, muttering to himself as he did. "Centre of the distortions, co-ordinates 1120," he finished triumphantly. "But what's the Enterprise doing here? A Class M planet in the middle of Federation space, totally

devoid of life. Computer, is there any record of the Federation visiting this planet?"

"Negative."

The planet was well away from the established trade routes and the only thing unusual about it was the time distortions; and if no other ship came close enough to feel anything other than a little turbulence... Captain Picard must have brought the Enterprise here for some reason and you didn't need an I.Q. of 200 to realise that the diversion had something to do with the mysterious passenger. In that case it was highly unlikely that the planet was unexplored, so logically there must be some reason why Starfleet had suppressed the records.

"Time distortions. If they could be focussed, then maybe... Time travel!" Wes exclaimed.

He was familiar with the slingshot theory but this seemed to be something different. Several time travel experiments had been reported, but there was nothing that seemed to fit into this pattern. There was obviously something on that planet that was capable of producing and focusing warps in time.

Geordi arrived on the bridge at a dead run. He skidded to a halt in front of the engineering station, transferring control to the battle bridge as he did so.

"Control circuits are starting to overload," he informed Data.

The android acknowledged Geordi's comment by scanning the ops panel on the Captain's chair. "Sensors are beginning to detect a pattern in the distortions. We will have them plotted in another 13.2 orbits."

"If we last that long."

"It would aid the process if we could have more power to the helm."

"Okay, I get the message. I'll get back down to engineering and see what I can do. Data, can you monitor engineering functions from up here?"

"Very well. Mr. Worf, please take ops."

"I'll let you know, Data," Geordi said, leaving the bridge once more. "I'm beginning to feel like a yo-yo," he muttered as the turbolift took him down to engineering. "If I had a few more staff... What the hell?"

The turbolift doors had opened to reveal Wesley Crusher hunched over the engineering computer, his back to Geordi. Out of uniform, he was obviously not meant to be there.

"Wes?" Geordi said.

Wesley jumped and turned around, a guilty expression on his face. He'd clearly been there when Geordi had left and had not expected him to be back so soon.

"I'd ask for an explanation but right now I could use your help. I need to boost the power to the helm control so we can dodge these distortions."

"What do you want me to do?" Wesley replied, with some relief.

"Monitor the intermix readouts while I try to channel warp power into the impulse engines."

Picard escorted Jack Crusher to the transporter on Deck 16 with mixed

feelings. The man was unwilling to leave the ship, understandably worried about his future. It was an awesome responsibility he shouldered. *History hinged on certain individuals,* Picard reflected. *Not necessarily those who were famous, the ordinary man in the street was just as likely to affect the course of future events.* *The Enterprise's logs clearly told how the death of one young woman had shaped the history of the Federation.* Picard did not know exactly what Jack Crusher's role would be. He hoped that, when this was all over, Starfleet would release the records and let him know what happened.

There were still many questions that Picard wanted to ask. He accepted that Starfleet could have orchestrated the chain of events which led to Crusher's 'death', a replicated shell replacing his body. He deeply wished that Starfleet had not assigned the Enterprise to this mission. Another Captain, who did not know Crusher, might have accepted his story more rapidly than Picard had done. Then there had been those problems with Wesley Crusher. Captain Picard still couldn't understand how Wes had known that his father was alive, and coming aboard the Enterprise.

When the two men reached the transporter room Crusher climbed onto the platform while Picard manned the controls. The Captain immediately saw that something was wrong. For some reason there was no power in the transporter circuits.

"You'd better step down for a moment. We've lost power. I'm going to have to call my chief engineer," Picard told Crusher, after fiddling with the controls for a few seconds. "Picard to engineering,"

"La Forge here."

"I have a problem in transporter

room 8. We have no power."

"I know, we've had to bleed power from anywhere we could. Wes, restore power to the transporters."

"Wait a minute. Mr. La Forge?"

"Um... I have a little unauthorised help. Believe me, sir, I really needed it."

"Get the transporters working, Mr. La Forge and then send Mr. Crusher to see me."

"Aye, sir. You should have power... now."

"Thank you, Mr. La Forge." Picard turned to face Jack. "I'm afraid that sometimes your son is more trouble than he's worth..."

The comment died on Picard's lips as he found himself looking into the wrong end of a phaser. Jack Crusher's expression had changed; he hardly looked like the same man.

"You told him that I was here. I warned you, Picard!" Crusher spat.

Picard spread his hands in front of him and tried to speak in a calm voice. "I did not know that Wes was here. Believe me, your son has no idea that you are on this ship."

"Shut up."

Without taking his eyes off Picard, Crusher moved to the transporter controls. He gestured sharply with his phaser and the Captain climbed onto the platform. As he did so his communicator beeped for his attention.

"La Forge to Captain Picard. I respectfully suggest that you hurry up and use that transporter. I'm going to

have to power down in precisely one minute."

"I'll have to answer that," Picard told Crusher.

"Very well," Crusher agreed.

"Picard to engineering. Geordi, get up here now! Call security..."

Picard was silenced by the wine of a phaser and a stun bolt hit him squarely in the chest.

Geordi was running for the turbolift before Picard was cut off, Wesley close behind him.

"Computer, give me the location of Captain Picard!" Wes shouted as they entered the lift.

"The Captain is no longer aboard the Enterprise," the computer replied.

"Deck 16," Geordi said. "Lt. Worf to transporter room 8. Data, scan the planet below for the Captain's communicator signal. I have reason to believe that he has been kidnapped."

The turbolift came to a smooth halt. It took Geordi and Wes about thirty seconds to reach the transporter room. Worf was waiting for them. In this time Data had completed his scan and was reporting back.

"Sensors indicate two life forms on the planet. I am assuming that the Human is Captain Picard."

"And the other one?" Worf asked.

"Reads as Romulan."

"Feed the co-ordinates to the transporter. Mr. La Forge and I will beam down."

"Very well. Data out."

"Sir," Wes spoke up. "Request permission to join the Away Team."

"No way, Wes. Do you know what Captain Picard would do to me if I let you beam down there?" Geordi replied.

"I'm in enough trouble with the Captain already. A little bit more's not going to hurt."

"Wes, no!"

"I'll just transport down after you."

"Not if you're in the brig you won't."

"Sir, I think I know what's going on down there. Something on that planet is generating and focusing warps in time. I think that the Romulans may be trying to rewrite history. I haven't got time to explain now but I've got to go down there."

"There's a Romulan down there, and where there's one there's usually more. You could get killed."

"I know that, sir."

"Let him come," Worf interrupted.

"Worf!"

"The boy shows courage, let him come."

"I give up. Worf, you're taking full responsibility for this."

Worf just grunted and handed a phaser to Geordi. Wesley picked up a tricorder.

"Wes, set the co-ordinates and energise," Geordi ordered.

The three figures vanished.

A sharp pain in his side brought Captain Picard back to his senses. The booted foot made contact with his ribs for the second time, forcing him to sit up. He looked around the ruins which surrounded him, identifying the glowing shape that was the Guardian of Forever. Standing over him was a man that Picard no longer recognised as Jack Crusher. The man was smirking.

"Who are you?" Picard asked, though his mouth felt as dry as dust.

"You don't need to know my name, *Jean-Luc*."

"Are you Human?"

"Romulan, my dear Captain, surgically altered as you can see."

"To look like someone I trusted."

"A simple ruse, to bring a dead man back to life."

"How did you know that I would accept you?"

"You were conditioned - a device known as a 'thought shaper'."

"Controlling my mind?"

"Not yours, but someone close to you. All we had to do was to suggest the possibility that Jack Crusher was alive and your puny Human minds did the rest."

"What do you want?"

"Do you think I'm stupid? If I tell you what I'm going to do you might stop it, and I can't take that chance."

The Romulan laughed as he turned away from Picard and spoke to the Guardian. Picard assumed that the language he spoke was Romulan. The Guardian responded; pictures appeared at the centre of the monolith. Scenes of history flashed past faster than the Human eye could follow. Captain Picard could not tell to which planet or race this history belonged. He desperately wanted to stop the Romulan but the pain in his side prevented him from moving fast. The Romulan gave one final ironic smirk before stepping through the portal and into the past. Picard managed to raise his arm and activate his communicator.

"Picard to Enterprise."

Static was the only reply. As he had expected, the Enterprise, the Federation no longer existed.

"Captain Picard!"

Picard started when he heard Geordi's voice echoing across the wasteland. There was a scrambling noise and Picard saw three figures climbing over the rubble. Wesley was the first to reach the Captain's side. He ran his tricorder over Picard.

"You have two broken ribs sir, no other damage."

Picard pushed the tricorder away and scrambled to his feet. "Mr. La Forge, Mr. Worf, try your communicators."

Puzzled expressions on their faces, the two officers did as they were asked.

"Nothing," Worf grunted.

"Me too," La Forge added. "Sir, what's going on here?"

"Why won't the Enterprise respond?"

"The Enterprise will not respond because it no longer exists in this time stream. Due to my own shortsightedness the Romulans have managed to gain control of the Guardian of Forever."

"The 'Guardian of Forever'?"

"A time portal, Mr. Worf."

"You were right, Wes," Geordi said. "You mean that the Romulans have changed history?"

Picard nodded. He still found it difficult to believe that he had been taken in. He glanced at the uncomprehending faces of his remaining crew, feeling himself mentally retreat from telling them what had happened. There had been plenty of reasons for him to suspect that Jack Crusher was not who he claimed to be. It came down to the simple fact that Picard had wanted his best friend back in the same way as Wes had wanted his father. Picard now knew that Wesley's dreams had not been the product of mental instability. The Captain had, at one time, been affected by the device the Romulan had mentioned. A Warbird, cloaked, could have been transmitting to the Enterprise for months. They may have even planted the device on board. It had been Wesley's certainty that his father was alive that had influenced Picard's thinking.

Pushing the disturbing thoughts to the back of his mind Captain Picard turned towards the present problem. "Yes, Mr. La Forge," Picard continued. "I don't know how, but it's happened."

"Can we go back and stop it?" Wesley asked.

"If we knew when," La Forge said.

"I believe we do," Picard told them. "The Romulan showed me certain

Starfleet records, to convince me that he was who he claimed to be. I don't believe that they were fabrications. If everything had gone to plan, we would have just winked out of existence with the rest of the crew."

"So?"

"So we can go back. Starbase 3, approximately one hundred years ago. Enterprise NCC-1701 is taking on new crew. One of us has to be on that ship. Geordi, given access to Starbase computers, could you implant false records?"

"At that level of technology it should be no problem."

"Mr. Worf, you will have to remain here. I'm sorry, but a Klingon in Federation space..."

"Understood, sir," Worf replied.

"Excuse me, sir, but which one of us do you want to board the Enterprise?" La Forge asked.

"I'm afraid that duty will fall upon Mr. Crusher," Picard replied.

"Me, sir?" Wes sounded startled.

"I am too old to make a convincing junior officer and Mr. La Forge's VISOR is too sophisticated to be a product of Federation technology for that period. I'm afraid that he would not be able to pass the routine medical examination. You, Mr. Crusher, are our only choice."

"I understand, sir."

"You will go aboard at Starbase 3 with the new crew complement. We will rendezvous with you 3 months later on Starbase 16. That is where the Romulans are supposed to make their attempt to

sabotage the Enterprise."

"Where shall we meet, sir?"

"There's a bar called the Listener. I know for a fact that its been there for at least a hundred years."

Captain Kirk pulled his uniform shirt over his head and left his quarters, carrying his boots in one hand and a memo in the other. Needless to say, he was late. *That's what comes of letting yourself get beaten to a pulp by your helmsman,* Kirk grinned wryly to himself. He would have been on time if he hadn't found it necessary to have a shower after a particularly strenuous fencing match with Mr. Sulu. Now he had to greet the new complement of crewmen. It was bad form for the Captain to arrive dishevelled - first impressions always counted. Kirk bolted into the turbolift, managing to pull his boots on as the doors closed.

"Deck 6," he said as he stood upright.

Kirk's destination was the recreation deck where twenty new crew members were waiting to be addressed by their Captain. They had been on board for barely an hour, picked up at Starbase 3 - all willing and eager to serve on the most famous ship in Starfleet, no doubt.

The turbolift slid to a smooth halt and Kirk strode into the corridor, the model of a calm, collected Captain. Mr. Spock joined him at the entrance to the meeting room.

"I have been reviewing the records of our new crewmen, Captain," Spock said.

"What do you think?" Kirk asked.

"Most satisfactory. I am surprised that Starfleet sent the low watch helmsman that you requested."

"Have they?"

"I believe the information is contained in the memorandum which is in your left hand."

"Ah, thank you, Mr. Spock."

"We also have three Academy graduates."

"I noticed... Anyway, Mr. Spock, time is pressing. If I'm any later they'll all go and sign on the Potemkin instead."

The two walked through the doors into the meeting room.

Ensign John Edwards glared at the pile of components which littered his bunk and issued forth a stream of swear words. He'd been trying to modify the circuits of the food dispenser and now he couldn't remember how to put it back together again. Edwards was the type of person who could walk a mile on a broken leg but was unable to pass a computer terminal without trying to improve the systems. Officially he had a Class 4 computer rating; however, due to three or four years of tinkering it was now in the region of Class 6. As the low watch bridge engineering officer he had plenty of time to play with the ship's systems.

He was a sharp-featured young man in his mid-twenties. Undistinguished mouse-brown hair fell over his forehead. On first impression most people thought that he was more than slightly odd. He had very little regard for authority and some found offensive his habit of swearing at

inanimate objects. The running monologue continued as he finally put the components back in the right order. He then switched to self congratulation mode as the food dispenser presented him with a cup of hot chocolate.

"Edwards, are you brilliant or what?" he exclaimed as he drank the beverage.

Getting the food dispenser to provide him with frothy hot chocolate had been quite a difficult task. He was interrupted by the doors to his quarters sliding open.

"Am I in the right place?" a slightly nervous voice asked.

Edwards looked up, to see his new room mate standing at the door. He was a thin, dark-haired young man carrying a Starfleet issue holdall. The absence of a gold stripe on his shirt indicated that, like Edwards, he was an ensign. "William Drake?" Edwards asked.

"Yes," the other replied.

"John Edwards. You and I are destined to be room-mates."

Edwards crossed the room and shook Drake's hand. He then shoved the cup he was holding into the young man's face. "Try some and tell me what you think."

Drake took a sip, an expression of surprised pleasure spreading over his face. "Hey, that's good."

"And you won't find a better cup of hot chocolate anywhere on the ship. I've modified the food dispenser - brilliantly, if I do say so myself."

"Why?"

"Bill - Do people call you Bill?"

"Um... yeah."

"Fresh out of the Academy?"

"No, three years on another Starship."

"You're not telling me that you actually *like* the replicated junk they pass off as food?"

"I've never given it much thought."

"Well, you can't produce a decent cup of hot chocolate unless you do what I've done."

"And what's that?"

"When are you on duty?"

"Not until low watch, but I've got my physical in a couple of hours."

"Just enough time to show you."

Edwards grabbed Drake's arm and practically dragged him across the room. Drake dropped his luggage on a bunk as he passed. Components were ripped out of the food dispenser again as Edwards started to explain his modifications.

The new Chief of Security for the starship Enterprise let himself into his quarters with some difficulty, burdened as he was by several bags and boxes. Once inside he threw his belongings onto the bed and sank down into the nearest chair. He'd nearly missed the Enterprise's departure from Starbase 3. Not exactly the best way to meet a new Captain, especially as he had also missed the Captain's formal introduction to the Enterprise. Rousing himself he moved to the synthesizer and ordered himself a

uniform; Captain Kirk would want to see him ASAP. He'd just pulled on his red shirt when the door signal sounded. Opening the door, the man found himself face to face with the Captain of the Enterprise. Kirk smiled easily.

"Lt. Crusher, welcome aboard. Better late than never."

"Thank you, Captain, I'm sorry I was late," Crusher replied.

"No problem, Mr. Crusher. May I have a word?"

"Of course. Come in."

Crusher led the Captain into the cabin, showing him to the easy chair.

"I haven't had time to unpack yet," Crusher explained as he noticed the Captain running his eyes over the mess in the sleeping area.

"Mr. Crusher, I've just received a communication from Starfleet that I think is worth bringing to your attention."

"Go ahead, sir."

"We've detected a great deal of activity between Klingon and Romulan empires. The alliance appears to be stronger than ever, just when we thought they might blow each other to pieces."

"That would solve all our problems."

"Too right. Starfleet thinks that they are gearing up for a major offensive into Federation space. The Admiralty suspects that both empires may have planted spies in key starship positions."

"You think that there may be enemy agents on board the Enterprise?"

"I just want you to be aware of the situation."

"Count on it, Captain."

Kirk rose and shook Crusher's hand. "I'll see you on the bridge then, Mr. Crusher."

"Right after my physical. I've heard that Dr. McCoy is very thorough."

"You wouldn't believe." Kirk gave a mock shudder.

"Yes, I would - my wife's a doctor."

"Just don't tell him if you've got any personal problems."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good luck."

Crusher chuckled as he escorted Kirk to the door. The smile faded from his face the moment the door slid shut.

"Well, you seem to be fit enough," McCoy said to Ensign Drake, throwing the young man's shirt to him, "but tell me, have you been having trouble sleeping recently?"

A worried frown flashed across Drake's features as he got to his feet. McCoy smiled. "Too much partying on Starbase 3? Don't worry son, we've all been there. So you were on the U.S.S. Valiant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you find the Enterprise any different?"

"I haven't been on board long enough to say, sir."

"I heard that Captain Perry takes a lot of getting used to."

"I didn't really have that much contact with him, sir."

"Very diplomatic. I always think that there are two basic types of Starship Captain, those who mix with their crew and those who don't. Then of course there's Jim Kirk."

Drake smiled at McCoy's raised eyebrow.

"Wait there a minute, I just want to take a blood sample," McCoy continued.

"Yes, sir."

Drake sat back on the exam bed, swinging his legs, idly staring into space. *Strange lad*, McCoy thought to himself as he went into his office to fetch a syringe. Drake didn't seem to be very talkative. He answered McCoy's questions politely enough but he didn't offer any information about himself. Most of the Starship's crew were open, friendly people so finding someone who was unwilling to talk was unusual. Maybe the boy was just shy. It was strange how the term 'boy' stuck, but McCoy couldn't help himself. Although Drake's age was given as twenty-three he didn't look much more than eighteen. He had a teenager's awkward way of moving, as if he hadn't quite grown into his body. Maybe it was worth mentioning to Jim? McCoy dismissed the thought. Jim had enough on his plate at the moment. It was only a hunch but there was definitely something strange about that young man.

"Hello, Doctor?" Jack Crusher's voice sounded from the entrance to McCoy's office.

"Just a minute," McCoy replied as he picked up the syringe. "Lt. Crusher?"

"Reporting as ordered."

"I've just got this sample to take then I'll be right with you."

McCoy led Crusher into main Sickbay. "Sit down." He gestured towards one of the exam beds. "Now, Mr. Drake, this won't hurt a bit."

"Don't believe him, Ensign, that's what they all say," Crusher joked.

"My mother's a doctor, sir," Drake replied dryly. "She used to say that all the time."

"And did it?"

"Invariably." Drake winced slightly as McCoy removed the sample, but his attention seemed to be centred on Lt. Crusher. Crusher felt the young man's stare and turned to regard him closely.

"Something wrong?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I'm finished with you, son," McCoy said.

"Thank you, sir."

The Ensign scrambled to his feet and left sickbay as fast as he could.

"Strange lad," Crusher commented.

"Mmmmm, know what you mean," McCoy agreed. "I'd say that he recognised you from somewhere."

"Name?"

"William Drake."

"Don't recognise it, but there was something familiar..." Crusher made a dismissive gesture. "No, can't say I know

him. It's probably nothing."

"If you say so. Anyway, let's get you checked out."

Lying back on the exam bed, Crusher stared at the ceiling. It was impossible that the Ensign knew. *You're just a bit on edge*, Crusher told himself. No one on this ship could possibly know who he was, where he had come from. He'd fooled the Captain so what had he done to make an Ensign suspicious?

Drake entered his quarters at a run and promptly fell over a long piece of wood which lay just inside the door.

"That you, Bill?" Edwards yelled from the sleeping area. "Mind my hockey stick."

"Thanks for the warning. I don't think that I did too much damage."

Edwards emerged in a pair of very brightly coloured shorts and a maroon and white shirt. He took the stick from Drake and examined it carefully. "No, it's okay. I've scored fifteen goals in the last ten matches with this stick... Hey, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Where are you playing?"

"We have an artificial pitch on the rec. deck. Didn't you have one on the Valiant?"

"Oh - yes, of course."

"Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm fine!"

"Look, do you want to play? One of our team members has broken her hand."

"I've only ever played ice hockey."

"Same principle. We'll make you a left wing or something, you probably won't even see the ball."

"Well... okay."

"Great, I'll wait for you. They'll expect me to be late anyway."

Three weeks out from Starbase 3 the crew of the Starship Enterprise was starting to get restless. As usual, Sulu and Chekov travelled to the bridge together for the start of their watch. The bridge was quiet when the two entered, any conversation having died out hours ago as boredom took over. Chekov often felt grateful for his promotion to the main watch crew. It was well known that exciting events were just as likely to occur in the middle of the night - if they did, however, you just got dismissed as the more experienced crew took over.

Sulu took the steps to the lower bridge in one bound and crossed over to his station.

"The long night's over, Ensign," he said cheerfully.

"Aye, sir," Drake replied, relinquishing his chair.

"Who's that?" Chekov asked. "I have not noticed him before."

"Don't know, must be the new low watch guy," Sulu replied.

"Is it my imagination or are these people getting younger?"

"You're hardly an old man yourself, Pavel."

"Tell me that next time you beat me in a fencing match."

Sulu chuckled as he started the routine check on his board. "Chekov - is it my imagination or is this board configured in a strange way?"

Chekov leaned over and glanced at the helm controls. "It does not seem unusual to me."

"Just you try and set a course."

"Bozhe moi!"

"Exactly. Someone's tied navigation into helm control."

"Why?"

Sulu just shrugged.

"Problems, gentlemen?" Captain Kirk's voice sounded very loud in Chekov's right ear.

"The low watch helmsman has set up his controls strangely, sair," Chekov replied. "He seems to think that we no longer require a navigator."

Kirk moved over to his chair and activated the communicator, "Mr. Drake, report to the bridge." He then sat back in his chair and turned expectantly towards the turbolift. Two minutes later the doors slid open and Ensign Drake sidled nervously onto the bridge.

Kirk beckoned. "Mr. Drake, would you kindly put the Enterprise's navigation and helm controls back the way you found them."

"Aye, sir," Drake gulped.

"And Mr. Drake..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Leave it that way in future."

"Aye, sir."

It was not impossible for Kirk to imagine why the Ensign had been fiddling with the control board. At least he hadn't disabled anything vital, and he'd had the sense to be embarrassed by the reprimand. Kirk always got annoyed when someone tried to interfere with the smooth running of his ship, be it Starfleet Admiral or lowly Ensign.

"Finished, sir," Drake said after twenty minutes.

"All right, dismissed."

On impulse Kirk followed Drake into the lift. "Mr. Drake," Kirk said when the lift began to move, "on your watch we tend to have a navigator or a helmsman, but not both."

"Yes, sir."

"There's a good reason for this policy. Would you care to remind me?"

"To save on personnel, sir."

"Exactly. Now what happens if you encounter an emergency situation?"

"I call the required first watch officers."

"Very good, Mr. Drake. You know, that was a very good piece of engineering."

"Thank you, sir."

"But one man can't do both jobs. Don't pull that trick again."

"Understood, sir."

The turbolift doors opened and Kirk

dismissed the Ensign. Drake walked away down the corridor, reminding Kirk of a disappointed puppy. *Strange lad*, Kirk thought to himself. The Captain did not send the lift back to the bridge; instead he decided to pay a visit to engineering.

Kirk found Mr. Scott with his head and shoulders stuck underneath a control panel. Unwilling to carry out a discussion with his Chief Engineer's feet, Kirk cleared his throat noisily. A vague spluttering sound came from the depths of the wiring before Mr. Scott emerged.

"Captain?" Scott asked tersely.

"Problems, Scotty?"

"Just a few modifications, sir."

"Speaking of modifications, how long would it take you to modify the helm to incorporate navigation?"

"It's a fairly standard emergency procedure. I could do it in a couple of hours."

"How about a non-engineering officer?"

"Working from the instruction manuals, it would probably take them a wee while longer. About twelve hours to lay out the new circuits."

"That's what I thought. Thank you, Mr. Scott."

"But Captain, why do you want to know?"

But Kirk was gone. Scott shrugged and crawled back under his console. Kirk returned to his quarters and activated his computer terminal. Calling up Drake's Starfleet record, he studied it intently.

The air in the arboretum was cool and clear, simulating a crisp spring morning on the planet Earth. The simulated sun had just risen and the simulated breeze gently stirred the leaves on the trees. First thing in the morning, Jack Crusher expected it to be empty. He was somewhat surprised when he almost blundered into Ensign Drake. The Ensign was sitting in the centre of the park under an oak tree, head down. Crusher was going to turn away but Drake chose that moment to look up. He scrambled to his feet when he recognised Crusher and started to leave. Something prompted Crusher to put out his hand and stop the Ensign. The young man looked scared to death by Crusher's presence.

"Hey, slow down, you don't have to go," Jack smiled. "This garden's big enough for both of us."

"I was leaving anyway," Drake lied.

"No you weren't, you were brooding. No one I know likes to be disturbed when they've got something on their mind."

"I guess not, sir."

Crusher smiled reassuringly at Drake, who managed a weak grin in return.

"I heard about your little trick on the bridge," Crusher continued.

"It worked!" Drake protested.

"I don't think that the Captain was too impressed."

"He sure wasn't."

"One thing you'll learn about Captain Kirk is that you don't mess with his ship."

"I'll remember that. Sir, will you excuse me?"

"Incidentally, how did you get the idea?"

"We used to run things that way on the last ship I served on. I just thought that..."

"So you've been rerouting the circuits on your console?"

"Yeah, but last night I forgot to put it back."

"Ensign - "

"Sir, I've really got to go."

"Of course."

Drake walked away. This time Jack let him go. Crusher still couldn't shake the feeling of familiarity. He knew that he'd seen the Ensign somewhere before and for the success of his mission he needed to remember.

"What do you make of that, Spock?" Jim Kirk said, turning his computer screen round to face his First Officer.

"There does seem to be a large number of Klingon and Romulan forays into Federation space," Spock acknowledged.

"But how are they crossing the Neutral Zones? Not one of our border stations has picked up anything."

"Without further information I feel unable to speculate."

"A hunch, Spock?"

"Captain?"

"Sorry, Spock. Starfleet Command is worried though. They've assigned us to the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone."

"Do you have a problem with that order, Jim?"

"I'm just not looking forward to another routine patrol."

"I will return to the bridge and inform them of the change in course."

"Check on Ensign Drake while you're up there. Make sure he hasn't rewired anything vital, like my chair."

"Very good, Captain."

"And I'll see you on the rec. deck to finish off last night's game."

"As I recall, you had just declared that you could win in twelve moves."

"Ten."

Mr. Spock raised an eyebrow.

"I've had a chance to think about it," Kirk continued.

Kirk was sure, and not for the first time, that Spock almost smiled as he left the Captain's quarters.

Spock expected the bridge to be quiet; however, when the turbolift doors opened, he discovered a heated discussion was in full progress.

"The problem with Klingons is that every last one of them is a mean angry son-of-a-bitch," Edwards was saying to Bob Morrison, the low watch communications officer. Morrison was a nondescript type of person. He had

white-blond hair and he considered his appearance improved by the presence of a moustache. He was the sort of man who would fade into any crowd. Some people considered him to be boring but he appeared to get on well with everyone he worked with. He had the rare talent of never letting himself worry about anything. LSD, Edwards often quoted - Luck, Strategy and Discipline.

"Don't forget the way that they treat everyone else they come across," Morrison replied.

It always amazed Spock that Humans could disagree with each other so violently, especially when both parties were arguing from the same point of view.

"Have either of you ever met a Klingon?" Drake asked.

"What do you mean?" Morrison wanted to know.

"How much do you know about the Klingon people?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"The Klingons are a highly ritualistic people. Their whole society is based on honour. Maybe if we tried to understand that there'd be a chance of peace."

"What *you* don't seem to understand is that the Klingons are mean angry bastards with no sense of humour!" Edwards interrupted.

Drake just shook his head, unwilling to continue the argument. As he turned back to his control board Spock heard him mutter, "I guess we're not that different after all."

Spock decided to make his presence



felt. He stepped down onto the lower bridge and sat in the centre seat. The three men around him all pretended to be extremely busy.

"Mr. Drake, set a course for the border of the Romulan Neutral Zone, Warp Factor 5."

"Aye, sir," Drake answered as he swapped seats to set the coordinates. He changed back again to engage the warp engines. The stars on the screen shifted slightly as the Enterprise turned onto her new course.

"What is our ETA, Ensign?"

"23.6 hours, sir."

Spock rose without ceremony and left the bridge. He could feel the eyes of the bridge crew on him. They were obviously wondering how much of their conversation he had overheard. Drake's attitude intrigued him. It was rare to find a Human with such unbiased feelings. Spock filed away the information in the back of his mind as he concentrated on the more immediate problem of preventing Captain Kirk winning another chess match.

Struck in the right way, a hockey ball can move at velocities in excess of 100 km per hour. In other words, when one hits you, it hurts. Lt. Morrison was a living embodiment of this fact. He limped into sickbay, ably supported by Ensign Drake.

"I knew I should have worn my shin pads," he gasped as he sat on one of the exam beds. "Do you think it's broken?"

"I don't think so," Drake replied.

"That's the last time that I play with

John on my side. You wouldn't think that he could be so lethal with a ball. Where's the Doctor?"

"Don't know. Hey, he'll probably just give you a shot of Cynazone."

"I beg your pardon?" McCoy said from the doorway of his office. "That pain killer's still in its experimental phase."

"I'm sorry, sir," Drake stammered.

McCoy sauntered forward and ran his tricorder over Morrison. "Incidentally, how did you find out about that compound?"

"I read a lot, sir."

McCoy shot the Ensign a long hard look before he went to work on Morrison's injury. Drake appeared to be decidedly uncomfortable; he didn't seem to be able to meet the Doctor's gaze. Instead he pretended to be thoroughly absorbed by the readouts on the medical scanners. As McCoy finished, Morrison flexed his ankle experimentally before getting to his feet.

"Thanks, Doctor," Morrison said.

McCoy just nodded as the two left.

It was unusual for the Captain to be on the bridge during low watch, but tonight he insisted on hanging around long after the officers had taken their posts. The truth was that he was highly nervous about his ship being in the vicinity of the Neutral Zone and he wanted to be around when the Enterprise took up position, just in case the Romulans had sent a reception committee. But nothing happened. Space remained black, the stars shone just as they always had and Romulan

Warbirds did not come warping out of the heavens. Still Kirk sat in his chair, staring at the screen. Edwards, who was manning the science station, coughed to get the Captain's attention.

"What is it, Ensign?" Kirk snapped.

"Sensors show the presence of a planet, designation B12-92, bearing 387 mark 4."

"Put it on the main screen, Mr. Edwards."

"I'm getting some strange life form readings, Captain. I'm not sure about this but it looks like Klingons."

"Mr. Drake, can you confirm Mr. Edwards' observations?"

"I'll take a look, sir," Drake replied, relieving Edwards at the science station. "Definitely Klingon life signs."

"How many?"

"Can't tell at this distance, sir."

"What is it with you?" Edwards whispered.

"What?"

"Being so bloody clever. Is there anything that you're not good at?"

Drake thought for a moment. "Poker," he admitted finally.

"Remind me you and I are going to have a game of cards."

Captain Kirk appeared to think for a moment. Klingons this close to the Romulan Neutral Zone indicated one of two things. Either the Klingons were planning a major offensive into Romulan space or they were planning a major

offensive into Federation space. Either way it needed investigation.

"Mr. Morrison, call the high watch officers to the bridge."

"Chucked out again," Edwards muttered to himself.

"Call from sickbay, sir," Morrison announced.

"What is it?" Kirk snapped.

"Mr. Chekov's dislocated his shoulder."

"Fencing with Sulu again?"

"Dr. McCoy didn't say, sir."

"All right. Mr. Drake, how's your navigating?"

"Adequate, sir," Drake replied.

"Take that position if you will."

"Aye, sir!"

The young Ensign relinquished his chair to Sulu and took the Navigator's position, barely suppressing a wide grin.

"Set a course for that planet, Mr. Drake. Mr. Sulu, warp factor 1."

"Aye sir," Sulu acknowledged.

"What's our ETA?"

"Twenty minutes, sir," Drake replied.

By this time the required officers had managed to get to the bridge, including Dr. McCoy, who was leaning indolently on the back of the Captain's chair.

"Mr. Spock." Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Can you find any evidence of Klingon or Romulan ships in the area?"

"Negative, sir," Spock replied.

"Then what the hell are they doing there?"

No one on the bridge answered Kirk's rhetorical question. There was silence for the next twenty minutes as the planet grew on the viewscreen.

"Take us into orbit, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered. "Spock?"

"The planet is registered as being class M. Mean surface temperature is 35C. Approximately 80% of the planet's surface is covered with water. The land masses support vegetation which is similar to that on Vira."

"I'm beaming down. We've got to find out what the Klingons are doing here. Uhura, call Mr. Crusher and tell him to meet me in the transporter room with a security team. Dr. McCoy, Mr. Drake, you're with me. Get yourselves kitted out and meet me in ten minutes. Mr. Spock, you have the bridge."

Kirk bolted out of his chair and into the turbolift, McCoy a few steps behind. The Captain had wanted to leave the bridge quickly to avoid McCoy. He knew that the Doctor was going to protest over the choice of the landing party.

"Why, Jim?" McCoy asked when the lift doors closed.

"Why what?" Kirk feigned innocence.

"Include Drake in the landing party."

"According to his record Drake is

ideally suited - "

"Don't give me that. You're just feeling guilty about that reprimand you gave him."

"No, I'm not."

"Are too. Jim, putting an untried officer on a dangerous assignment is not the way."

"He's been on several missions with the Valiant. I just thought that it was time to stretch him a little."

"Believe me, there's something decidedly odd about that young man."

"Your protest has been noted, Dr. McCoy, but I'm not changing my mind."

McCoy made a disparaging sound and moved to the back of the turbolift, glaring at Kirk's back.

Ensign Drake took the phaser from Lt. Crusher, staring at it as if he didn't quite know what it was for. He looked more than slightly apprehensive at the thought of being included in the landing party. Securing the phaser, he settled the tricorder across his shoulder and stepped onto the transporter platform with the two security guards. Dr. McCoy was the last to arrive, on the verge of being late. He slouched onto the platform and glared at the other members of the party.

"Very well, gentlemen, phasers on stun. Mr. Kyle, I want you to beam us down approximately half a kilometer from the Klingons. Energise."

"Did anyone think to bring an umbrella?" McCoy muttered when they

materialised on the surface of the planet. The rain was pouring through the canopy of vegetation, drenching the landing party in seconds. They had appeared in a small clearing, surrounded by a wall of vegetation. The rain was hard and warm, providing little respite from the oppressive heat. Like any other jungle the forest was teeming with life. Drake lost count of the number of species he recorded as he scanned the area. The Klingons, however, were located in a north-westerly direction. Kirk led the way as the landing party started to push its way through the vegetation.

The Klingons were based in a large grassy clearing approximately half a kilometer in diameter. A Bird of Prey dominated the open space. From his vantage point at the edge of the clearing, Kirk counted twenty Klingons moving about the base of the ship. He motioned to Jack Crusher and the two vanished silently back into the jungle. The rest of the party were stationed a hundred meters away. They were tired, wet and feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

"Well?" McCoy asked as Kirk and Crusher returned.

"There's a ship which is crawling with Klingons, but as to what they're doing here?" Kirk shrugged. "Mr. Crusher?"

"I don't know, sir. We might have better luck from the other side of the clearing. The jungle is closer to the ship."

"Take your security team and work your way round."

"Aye, sir."

"Dr. McCoy, Mr. Drake and I will continue to observe from this side. Rendezvous back here in two hours."

Crusher led his team away as Kirk took his men back to the edge of the clearing. They crouched in the undergrowth and watched the Klingon activity in front of the Bird of Prey.

"Is it my imagination or are they digging a hole in the ground?" McCoy whispered.

Kirk raised his hand to shut the Doctor up, but he admitted that it did look as if the Klingons were clearing earth with their hand phasers. The pit was about ten meters long and half a metre deep. Several long metal boxes were stacked beside it.

"I'm going to take closer look," Kirk said. "We need to find out what's going on here."

"I'll come with you," McCoy volunteered.

"Mr. Drake, stay here and keep in contact with the Enterprise."

"But Captain, you can't put yourself in -" Drake protested.

"That's an order, Mr. Drake."

Drawing their phasers Kirk and McCoy crouched low in the long grass and started to crawl towards the ship. Drake sat back and opened his communicator, having slight trouble opening the device with the same flourish that Captain Kirk managed.

"Drake to Enterprise," he whispered into the device.

"Enterprise here, go ahead," Uhura's voice replied.

"The landing party has just split up to continue surveillance."

"Understood. Enterprise out."

If McCoy thought that he'd been uncomfortable before, it was nothing compared with the way he was feeling now. He had been crawling on his stomach for at least half an hour through foot-high wet grass. All he could see were the soles of Kirk's boots, and it smelt as if the Captain had trodden in something. The Klingon activity had died down. They had finished digging the pit, as McCoy had dubbed it, and had disappeared back into the ship. Kirk scrambled to his feet behind the stacked crates and pulled McCoy up. While the Doctor was brushing himself down Kirk opened one of the crates and peered inside. He pulled out a metal rod, approximately 1.5 meters long.

"What do you make of this, Bones?" Kirk asked McCoy.

"Klingon scaffolding?"

"You must activate it here..."

"Stop playing with that thing, Jim, there's someone coming."

McCoy pulled Kirk back down behind the boxes. Five Klingons entered the clearing from behind the ship. Walking in front of them were the three members of the security team. They looked, basically, unharmed, although Crusher was supporting a black eye.

"Captain Kirk!" one of the Klingons shouted. "This is your old friend Captain Koloth. I know that you're down here and I know that you can hear me. I have your men and now I want you."

"He can't have realised that we're this close," McCoy hissed.

"To prove that I mean what I say..." Koloth continued, drawing his disruptor.

"No!" Kirk shouted, standing up, McCoy beside him.

"My dear Captain Kirk, how nice to see you again."

Koloth made a sharp gesture and his Klingons relieved Kirk and McCoy of their phasers and communicators. Calmly, he turned towards the security team and fired twice. The men to the left and right of Crusher dropped without a sound. Kirk made an inarticulate sound and lunged towards Koloth. He didn't get very far. Two Klingon warriors leapt at him, restraining him by knocking him unconscious.

"Bring him," Koloth said to Crusher and McCoy.

"Where's Drake?" Crusher whispered as they bent over Kirk's still form.

"Still in the forest," McCoy replied.

"I hope he's got the sense to stay there."

The two men draped Kirk's arms over their shoulders and half-dragged, half-carried the Captain into the Bird of Prey.

Ensign Drake watched the Enterprise's officers being taken aboard the Klingon ship with mounting despair.

"Spread out and search the surrounding area. There may be more of them," the Klingon commander ordered.

"I'd better get out of here," Drake muttered to himself as he watched the Klingon warriors cross the clearing. There was no way that he would be able

to escape across the jungle, he just couldn't move fast enough. It was risky to contact the Enterprise, taking up vital seconds. He knew that there was only one way out, and that was up. Grabbing the nearest vine he started pulling himself upwards. It was about ten meters up to the lowest branches. Charged with fear Drake made the ascent in about thirty seconds. He buried himself in the vegetation and tried to get his breathing under control.

*Damn, he swore, how do you get yourself into these situations? Get a grip on yourself!* He fumbled for his communicator, almost dropping it on the head of a passing Klingon.

"Drake to Enterprise," he whispered.

"Spock here," came the clipped reply.

"Sir, we have a problem."

"Elaborate, Ensign."

"Captain Kirk, Lt. Crusher and Dr. McCoy have been taken prisoner by the Klingons."

"And Ensigns Fisher and More?"

"They're dead, sir."

"Do you require beam up?"

"Negative, sir. The area's swarming with Klingons but I'm safe for the moment."

"Very well, maintain your position and observe. I will contact you again in one hour. Spock out."

Spock shut off communications and sat back in the Captain's chair, steeping his fingers before him. He must now

tread very carefully. Any action the Enterprise might take would jeopardise the lives of the officers in the hands of the Klingons.

"Is he going to be okay?" Jack Crusher asked McCoy.

"Yeah, he'll be fine," McCoy assured him, "although he's been knocked out so many times that I'm surprised that he's not permanently punch drunk."

The three men had been locked in a small cabin deep inside the Klingon vessel. Kirk had been laid on the bunk, still unconscious.

"Now let's have a look at you." McCoy started to examine Crusher's black eye.

Crusher pulled away. "I'm okay," he protested.

"So what happened?" McCoy asked.

"We walked straight into them. Koloth recognised the insignia and worked out that Kirk must be around somewhere."

"Damn Jim, he always has to lead the landing parties. Someone should make a rule about it."

"Do you think Drake's managed to contact the Enterprise?"

"I hope so, but I wouldn't put too much faith in that young man. He probably didn't get out of the area fast enough to open communications."

"The Klingons don't normally take prisoners. I wonder what they've got planned for us?"

"Nothing pleasant," McCoy muttered.

"It's at times like these that I wonder why I ever joined Starfleet."

"Have you got a family?"

"Yes. A wife and son living on Earth. You?"

"A daughter and ex-wife on one of the colony worlds. I don't get to see Joanna very often."

"Know what you mean. My son's at the age where he's changed every time I see him. You miss so much - the first steps, the first words. Although Beverly swears that Wesley's first words were 'warp coil'."

"Joanna's were 'I need a drink', just like her Dad... I don't believe this. Here we are, on the brink of certain death and we're talking about our kids."

"Can you think of anything else to talk about?"

There was a soft moan from the general direction of the bunk. This was followed by a very load moan as Kirk sat up.

"How are you feeling?" McCoy asked the Captain.

The only reply he got was another inarticulate sound when Kirk realised the folly of raising his head. McCoy went over and gave him a quick examination. "You'll live," was McCoy's final diagnosis.

"But for how long?" Kirk replied, getting to his feet and examining the door to their prison.

"We've already done all that," Crusher told him.

"And neither of us remembered to bring a hairpin," McCoy added.

Darkness fell after a 36-hour day. The temperature dropped by a couple of degrees. Drake had now been sitting in the same tree for six hours and was consequently tired, wet and hungry. The Klingon party had given up the search several hours ago without detecting him.

As a result of Drake's frequent calls to the Enterprise, Spock had decided to send a second landing party at nightfall. Drake stared out across the clearing for what seemed like the three thousandth time. There were definite signs of activity as Klingon warriors began to light torches along the length of the pit which they had so painstakingly dug.

"My dear Captain Kirk." Koloth faced the three Federation officers across their prison.

"My dear Commander Koloth," Kirk mimicked, deliberately reducing Koloth a rank, matching the Klingon's benign smile with one of his own. "Would you like to explain to me and my crew exactly what brings you into Federation territory?"

"This planet is disputed by the Federation and the Romulan Empire, so from a certain point of view we're both trespassing."

"Quit being so polite to one another. Just tell us what you're planning to do to us!" McCoy interrupted.

The smile vanished from Koloth's face. He snapped his fingers and several warriors appeared. "Take them," he ordered. "Before Karth's celebration, the

Humans will walk the river of pain."

The three men were dragged from the room and into the corridors of the ship. At the back of the group, Kirk had a reasonable view of where they were going. He dragged his feet a little, taking a good look round. This was the first time that he had been on board a Klingon vessel and he didn't want to waste the opportunity. Passing what he assumed was the engineering section he deliberately tripped over his own feet, staring through the open door as he fell. The Klingon warriors pulled him to his feet, but not before he'd seen two objects. The first was a glowing spherical object which appeared to be connected to the ship's defence systems. Standing next to the device, in deep conversation with a Klingon officer, was a Romulan sub-commander. *So Starfleet command was right*, Kirk thought to himself. Romulans on a Klingon ship indicated that the alliance was stronger than suspected. As for the unknown device, Kirk was going to have to discuss that with Spock, if they ever managed to get themselves out of their present predicament. It could be some new weapon; the possibility was frightening.

The Humans were taken out of the ship back into the clearing. Night had fallen and the area around the ship was illuminated with flickering torches. Klingon warriors stood along each side of the pit, long metal rods in their hands. The Klingons restraining Kirk pushed him forwards between the avenue of torches.

"Now, Captain, let's see how tough you Humans really are. Walk!" Koloth laughed.

Before he could take a step there was a noise from the jungle, just loud enough to draw the attention of the Klingons. Something prompted Kirk to

close his eyes; he gestured for McCoy and Crusher to do the same. The small sound was followed by an explosive flash of bright white light. Kirk felt its glare behind his closed lids. As soon as the light died away Kirk made a dash for the forest, pausing only to check that his two colleagues were following. As soon as they reached the safety of the trees Kirk heard a voice snap, "Enterprise, six to beam up," and felt the familiar tingling sensation as the transporter snatched them to safety.

Back on the Enterprise McCoy sat on the edge of the transporter platform, breathing heavily and glaring at the world in general. Kirk stepped down and turned to regard the rest of the party. Spock, Drake and Sulu stood with Crusher.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock, your timing was impeccable," Kirk said.

"Captain, setting off the magnesium flare was Mr Drake's idea." Spock spoke calmly, turning his gaze on Drake, who went red and stared at his feet.

"Thank you, Mr. Drake," Kirk amended. "I'll see you all in the briefing room in twenty minutes."

Drake made his way back to his quarters with the thought of a hot shower and a change of clothes foremost in his mind. Even in the controlled atmosphere of the ship he found himself shivering from his wet clothes and the drop in temperature. He let himself into his quarters, hoping that his room mate would be out. He was in luck. Edwards was probably involved in one of his many sporting activities.

Drake didn't bother to turn the lights on as he pulled off his uniform and

stepped into the shower. Five minutes later he was on his way to the briefing room, stopping only to 'borrow' a bar of chocolate from Edwards' private supply. Despite the shower his muscles were starting to ache and he was still shivering. He was the first to arrive.

Seating himself he laid his head on the table. "Don't tell me I'm getting a headache," he said to the empty room.

Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy arrived, closely followed by Spock and Jack Crusher. Kirk took the seat at the head of the table.

"Well, gentlemen, as far as I can see we have two questions to answer. Firstly, what were the Klingons doing in Federation space, and secondly what were they doing on B12-92? Mr. Spock?"

"The planet has no military significance, no minerals of any worth -"

"Dilithium?" Crusher asked.

"Only in trace quantities."

"Mr. Drake, you had a different view from the rest of us. What's your opinion?"

Drake sneezed three times and cleared his throat before replying, "I may be wrong, sir, but I think they were preparing for some kind of religious ceremony."

"What makes you say that?"

"They appeared to have pain sticks. They're only used in Klingon ceremonies."

"Never heard of them," McCoy interrupted.

"There've been rumours from the

border systems," Kirk said. "Carry on, Ensign."

"It's my guess that they landed on B12-92 just to observe a religious duty which they couldn't carry out on board ship. But as to why they're in Federation space...?"

"When we were taken outside I noticed a Romulan on board. He seemed to be instructing one of the Klingon officers."

"Do you think that the two empires are testing a new weapon?" Crusher asked.

"It is a definite possibility," Spock said.

"Worth thinking about," Kirk acknowledged. "Thank you for your time. Dismissed."

The officers stood and left the conference room. Kirk caught Spock's eye, indicating that he wanted to speak to his First Officer privately. Spock remained behind and took his seat again, raising an eyebrow.

"We'll have to prove it, Spock. The Federation won't want to get involved unless we do."

"That is true," Spock agreed.

"I have an idea, Spock, but I don't want to involve any other member of the crew."

"Agreed."

"I'm going to have to stick my neck out on this one. If I make a mistake it mustn't backfire on Starfleet Command. Will you help me?"

Spock just raised an eyebrow.

Drake found himself walking back towards the living quarters with Dr. McCoy. The Doctor seemed to be in a worse mood than normal as slouched along beside Drake. All of a sudden he smiled disarmingly and said, "You sounded a little hoarse in there."

"I seem to have started a sore throat, sir. I'll be okay," Drake replied.

"Maybe you should pop down to sickbay and I'll take a look."

"I just need a good night's sleep, sir."

"Well, come down tomorrow morning if you're still having trouble."

The Doctor left Drake at the junction and wandered off towards the senior officer's quarters. Drake, on legs which felt decidedly unsteady, returned to his own room. He let himself in. The lights were now on and Edwards, still in full hockey kit, was standing on the desk with his head stuck in the air conditioning controls, muttering dark and deadly curses. Drake moved into the sleeping area and rummaged in his closet. Pulling out a sweater he put it on and went to the food dispenser. He ordered a cup of hot Earl Grey tea and went to stand behind Edwards.

"I'm trying to turn the temperature up," Edwards explained, "bypassing the main computer. I think the default should be about 25C."

"Good. I've been cold ever since I got back on board," Drake said.

Edwards jumped down from his precarious perch. "That's an... interesting jumper, Bill."

"My Mom knitted it for me. It's revolting, but its warm."

"So you brought it for its calorific value. How was the landing party?"

"Wet."

Edwards laughed as he went to get changed. Drake sat at the desk, beginning to wonder if he should go and see Dr McCoy. His headache was now severe and his throat was so sore that he could hardly speak. Despite the extra sweater he was still cold. Edwards was saying something from the other room but Drake was too tired to listen. The sound of the door chime roused him and he managed to stagger to his feet to answer it.

"Hi," Jack Crusher grinned.

"Sir?"

"I just dropped by to say thanks."

"What?"

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course, sir."

Drake led Crusher into the living area, glad of the excuse to sit down again.

"Young man, whether you like it or not, you saved our lives down there," Crusher continued.

"I just sat in a tree for several hours, sir," Drake croaked. "If you don't mind, sir, I think I'd better get some sleep."

"Ensign, do you have a problem with me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Every time we run into each other

you look as if you want to get as far from me as possible."

"I wasn't aware..."

"I think that you know something about me, something that no one else on the ship has worked out. You see I know you from somewhere, but I just can't work out where."

"Sir... I don't think that you'd believe me if I told you."

"You never know until you try."

"Sir, are you married?"

"Yes, why?"

"Children?"

"One."

"Could you tell me something about him?"

"Like what?"

"What did you get him on his third birthday?"

"I took him up to my ship and gave him a tour. The Captain was on shore leave so I took the opportunity to show Wes around."

"Sir, I don't think that you're going to believe this....."

"Ensign!"

Drake was no longer looking at Crusher; his eyes were unfocused. As Crusher watched, Drake crumpled in his chair and slid to the ground. Jack crouched down beside him.

"Mr. Drake! Mr. Drake!"

Edwards emerged from the shower, a towel clutched round his waist.

"What's up? Bill?"

"He just collapsed," Crusher explained. "He's burning up - call sickbay."

Doctor McCoy ran his scanner over Drake's still form.

"Well, Bones?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know, Jim. He's picked up some kind of respiratory virus."

"From the planet?"

"Difficult to say. Whatever it is he doesn't seem to have any resistance to it."

"And the rest of us?"

"No problems."

"Keep him under observation. Let me know when he wakes up."

"That could be some time, Jim, but that's not all."

"What?"

"There are several things about this young man that don't add up."

"Go on."

McCoy led the way into his office and sat at the desk. Kirk took the seat opposite. The Doctor rummaged through his desk and produced a hard copy of Drake's medical records.

"I did a blood sample analysis," McCoy explained, "and he's missing several antibodies which are common in

the blood of you or me, and yet his records clearly state that he comes from Earth."

"You think that his records have been forged?"

"It's not only that. As part of the routine medical I measure height. I measured him again when he was brought in."

"And?"

"He's grown half an inch."

"What?"

"We've got a kid on board. A very smart kid, I grant you."

"A kid, flying my ship, rewiring my control panels, beaming down on my landing parties. How the hell did he get on board?"

"I guess we'll have to wait until he wakes up to find out."

"How long?"

"Couple of hours. Don't be too hard on him, Jim, he did save our lives."

Kirk just grunted and left. McCoy followed him out into main sickbay. The Captain appeared to be preoccupied by something; maybe the stress was finally getting to him. He was definitely not his usual self. McCoy pondered the matter as he returned to his patient's side.

Jack Crusher was standing over Drake as he had done every day since the boy's collapse. McCoy had had to chase visitors out of the sickbay continuously over the past fortnight. The entire complement of the ship's hockey players

had trooped through and Ensign Edwards had been in every day, waving some chocolate delight. Even the Captain had popped his head round the door on most days. This was nothing in comparison with the single-minded obsession that seemed to be eating into Crusher. He spent several hours of each day at Drake's bedside.

The boy had been drifting in and out of consciousness since he had been brought into sickbay. His fever hadn't broken until 24 hours ago, a fact which had caused McCoy a great deal of concern. Drake now seemed to be sleeping peacefully, without any of the outbursts which had punctuated his delirium. McCoy had no idea what he had been shouting about. He had not recognised the any of the places or people that Drake had mentioned. The exception had been a brief reference to something that could be construed as the Guardian of Forever. He'd told Captain Kirk, but Jim had been too involved in his dealings with the Romulans. The Doctor knew that only a few people in the Federation had knowledge regarding the Guardian. Outside the Admiralty there were only seven, all of whom were stationed aboard the Enterprise. How the boy had found out about the time portal McCoy didn't even begin to guess, but he intended to find out.

Meanwhile he still had to do something about Crusher. Something was eating into the man. McCoy leaned on the door to his office, arms folded and watched the man for a few moments.

"I told you that I'd let you know if there was any change," he said eventually.

"I know, Doctor."

"Come on, Jack, what's wrong? Tell your friendly neighbourhood country

doctor."

"I'm just worried about the kid."

"Try me with the real reason. Believe me, I have a very high credibility rating."

"What are his real chances, Doctor?"

"We've got the virus out of his system but it was touch and go for a time. Medically he's out of danger."

"Then why doesn't he wake up?"

"My guess is that this young man's been under extreme emotional stress for some time. He's just taking a brief trip away from reality. When he's ready he'll be back."

"Look, I've gotta go. Thanks, Doc."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Doctor..."

"Come on, I haven't got all day. I've got to check the Captain's ears; I want to make sure that turning him into a Romulan didn't have any unpleasant side effects."

There were voices talking above him. It was probably just Mom trying to wake him up. He decided to ignore the urgent tones - he was too comfortable. Maybe if he kept quiet and still she would go away. *Wait a minute*, he thought, *that's not Mom! It's Dad!* His father wasn't home often. Wesley Crusher decided to open his eyes. The lights dazzled him for a moment. When his vision cleared he looked round to see who had been talking to him, but the room was empty. A voice was calling over the ship's communication system,

"Mr. Crusher, report to the bridge."

Mr. Crusher, report to the bridge..."

Wes threw off the covers and was halfway out of the door before he remembered where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. The act of standing had caused the room to spin. For some reason his legs felt unsteady, as if he hadn't used them for a while. He sat cross-legged on the floor, waiting for his head to clear, trying to make sense of the situation. He was in sickbay, that much was certain, but how he got there was a complete mystery. Deciding that for now the best thing he could do was to return to bed, he scrambled back under the covers. He remembered beaming back from the planet, then going to the briefing meeting, then... then...

His musings were interrupted by Nurse Chapel bustling into sickbay. "Well, well, well," she smiled, "so you're back with us."

Wesley managed a weak smile in return. He always felt nervous in Nurse Chapel's presence. There was something about her maternal nature that reminded him of Lwaxana Troi. She came over and ran a medical sensor over him.

"You seem to be fine but I'm going to call Dr. McCoy to check you over."

"Welcome back," McCoy said, examining the readouts on the monitor. He then repeated Nurse Chapel's examination.

"What happened to me?" Wesley asked.

"You had a viral infection, affecting your respiratory system. You collapsed two weeks ago, talking to Jack Crusher after returning from the landing party debriefing. He and Edwards brought you in."

"Two weeks?"

"I was just beginning to think that you didn't want to rejoin reality."

"When can I get out of here, sir?"

"Not yet, young man. You're full of questions, but it's time I asked you a few."

"Sir?" Wesley feigned an innocent expression but inside he groaned. How much had he said while unconscious?

"The Captain will be along in a moment. You either tell us exactly who you are or we send you to the brig and let the security boys beat it out of you."

Wes knew that the threat was an empty one but he couldn't see a way to distract the Doctor from his line of questioning. Drawing his knees up to his chest, Wes tried desperately to think himself out of his present situation. Here he was, a hundred years before his birth, about to be court-martialled whilst a Romulan saboteur was roaming the ship disguised as the Chief of Security.

"Let's start with the easy stuff." Kirk faced Wesley Crusher across sickbay. "Your name?"

"Wesley," Wes admitted. He felt that he could tell them that much.

"Secondly, what the hell are you doing on my ship?"

The words of a fifteen year old boy flashed through Wesley's mind. *I'm with Starfleet. We don't lie.* For the first time in his career Wesley Crusher decided not to tell the truth to a superior officer.

"I stowed away, sir," he said slowly, turning innocent brown eyes on Captain

Kirk. This technique worked without fail on adults except Captain Picard; Kirk appeared to be the other exception.

"Stowed away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell me how you managed to break into the Starfleet computer network and implant a false record?"

"I'm good with machines, sir."

"And how the hell you managed to fly my ship?"

"I learned from textbooks. It was easy, and on low watch I didn't exactly have a lot to do."

"Where are your parents, kid? Do they know that you're here?"

"I don't know, sir."

Kirk stared at Crusher for a long moment, before turning away to confer with Dr McCoy. "What do you think, Bones?"

"I don't believe a word of it," the Doctor replied bluntly.

"Neither do I, but he's just a kid."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Keep an eye on him, I guess, and ship him back to wherever he came from when we reach Starbase 16."

"We can't just give him free run of the ship for three weeks. He's already proved himself technically skilled. Left idle, he'll probably blow up the ship or something," McCoy muttered gloomily.

"You're probably right. Wesley?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come up to the bridge with me and let's see if we can find you something to keep you out of trouble."

"Yes, sir!" Wes jumped up and was out of the door before McCoy could protest.

Nothing travels faster on a starship than gossip. Within an hour of Wesley Crusher's change in status, Ensign John Edwards had naturally heard all about it. He arrived back at their quarters to find his room-mate packing his belongings under the stern gaze of Mr. Spock. Edwards came to a halt just inside the door.

"Bill?" he questioned.

"Actually, it's Wesley," Wes replied.

"Where are you going?"

"The Captain's moving me to quarters on the senior officers' deck, so I can be supervised."

Edwards opened his mouth to make a derogatory comment about the senior officers but thought better of it. Wesley lifted the holdall that carried his belongings and with a parting grin, left. He was halfway down the corridor before he heard the voice call after him,

"Are you still going to be able to play next week?"

Wes shrugged in return. "If you still want me to."

"1100 hours, okay?"

"Okay."

"That is all right, sir?" Wesley asked Spock when they were standing in the turbolift.

"You will have to ask the Captain, but I will not raise an objection."

The observation deck had grown to be one of Wesley Crusher's favourite areas on the Enterprise. If the truth be known, he felt the original ship to be a little claustrophobic when compared to its 24th century counterpart. At least when he was gazing at the stars he felt a little more at home. Seating himself, he pulled out his tricorder to update his log.

"Personal Log: Stardate 3289.54, Ensign Wesley Crusher reporting.

The Enterprise is three weeks out from Starbase 16 and I'm no closer to finding out what the Romulan agent is up to. According to Dr. McCoy I've been pretty much out of it for the past fortnight, some virus I picked up on the away team expedition. It's possible that the Romulans have already made their move. My guess is that the first place they'll try to sabotage is engineering but I haven't managed to get down there to have a look round."

Wes closed his tricorder and smiled to himself. As Ensign William Drake there were some areas of the ship that were, while not exactly off limits, places where it would raise questions if he was found poking around. However, no-one was going to bother about a kid running about asking questions - this he knew from past experience. Maybe he should have tried that approach from the beginning? He dismissed the idea quickly. If he'd done that he never would

have had the chance to fly this Enterprise. She was different from his own ship... Yes, she was slower, less responsive, but in some ways he felt more in control when he was at the helm. He could feel the ship respond to every change he made - but she still didn't compare with NCC-1701D. He had also come to understand all the things that he had read about James T. Kirk. It would be very easy to fall in love with this ship.

Taking a deep breath, Wesley let himself stare at the stars. He was so wrapped up in the view that he didn't hear the doors slide open. Kirk entered the room and sat down beside him.

"Well, Wesley." The Captain smiled at the young man. "What do you think of my ship?"

"It's great, sir."

"Call me Jim."

"Yes sir... er, Jim."

"So have you got plans to join Starfleet?"

"My application's been tendered. As soon as they've got space for me, I'll be going."

"What area do you plan to go into?"

"I'm going to be a Starship Captain."

Kirk was momentarily taken aback. "You realise that there's a lot of competition for that post?"

"I know, sir, but it's all I've ever wanted to do."

"You're a smart kid, you may get lucky. Tell me, why did you stow away on my ship? Have you got problems with your family, or...?"

"No, sir, it's nothing like that. I just wanted to serve on the Enterprise. Ever since I was little I've heard the stories. Getting into Starfleet wasn't enough. I wanted to be on *this* ship; I just couldn't wait for something that might not happen." Wesley looked at the Captain, knowing that part of what he said was true. He'd pressured his Mom into taking that original assignment, despite the fact that she had been unwilling to serve under Captain Picard.

Kirk smiled back, acknowledging the wanderlust that filled his own soul. "There's still something I don't understand," he went on.

He was interrupted by the sound of the door sliding open as Jack Crusher entered the room. Wesley bounced to his feet and mumbled his apologies to the Captain. "I'm sorry, sir, but I've got to go. Dr. McCoy wants to check me over again."

"Of course, dismissed."

Wesley left the room quickly, trying desperately not to break into a run. He couldn't bear to be in the same room as the man who was impersonating his father. If only the impostor wasn't doing such a good job! Sometimes Wesley had worried that he was forgetting about the man his father had been. Now, however, he remembered everything with startling clarity. Every word, smile and action was so like Jack Crusher that it made Wes feel cold. What would he do if it actually came to accusing the man? Wes fervently hoped that they would reach Starbase 16 before it came to that. Let Captain Picard deal with it - after all that was why he was the Captain.

"That's one very odd kid," Jack Crusher commented to Kirk as he watched Wesley's retreating back.

"Is it time for our judo bout?" Kirk asked.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but that's what I've come to talk to you about. I've just had a fencing match with Mr. Sulu and I pulled a muscle. Dr. McCoy recommends that I don't do anything too strenuous for the next few days."

"I think I'm going to have to have a word with Sulu. He seems to be working his way through my crew in a pretty systematic manner."

"I could manage a chess match?"

"You're on. It'll make a change from beating Mr. Spock."

"What does this do, Mr. Scott?" Wesley Crusher enthused. He was pointing at a piece of apparatus that he knew perfectly well was the matter-antimatter mix regulator.

"Aye, well, lad - " Scott began.

Wesley leaned over Scott's shoulder as the engineer launched into another long and incredibly detailed explanation. While Scott was distracted, Wes ran the remote scanner from his tricorder over the instrumentation, hoping to pick up some information that he could analyse later, at his leisure. His twenty-fourth century tricorder was concealed beneath the sweater that he now wore to replace his official uniform. It helped to remind people that he was just a kid, eager to learn all he could about Starship operations. People tended to forget that he'd been flying the ship in the weeks prior to his discovery. Whilst Scott was in mid-flow Wes heard his tricorder give an audible beep. That was it! He'd obviously picked up something that the Enterprise's sensors weren't calibrated to

detect. Wesley sneaked a look at the readouts. The foreign substance was clearly indicated but he didn't recognise the pattern. Flipping through his photographic memory he tried to match what he had seen with something that he knew; nothing registered.

"Mr. Scott," Wesley interrupted, "can we take a look inside?"

"Of course, lad. You know, most boys your age are more interested in the lassies than in warp drive. Keep it up and you could be a Chief Engineer yourself one day."

Scott got down on his knees and removed the necessary inspection panel, and both peered into the maze of circuitry. They spotted it almost at once. A green canister, lodged just beyond reach.

"What in hell...?" Scott began stretching out his hand.

"Don't touch it, sir!" Wesley barked. Mr. Scott froze. "I think that it's some kind of sabotage device."

Scott scrambled to his feet and crossed to the communicator. "Scott to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here," the Captain's voice replied promptly.

"You'd better get down to engineering, sir. I think we have a wee problem."

"It's here, Captain," Scott pointed. "Tied into the matter-antimatter mix controls."

"But why hasn't it gone off?" Kirk wanted to know.

"The detonator appears to rely upon the decay of an alpha source," Mr. Spock said, analysing his tricorder readouts.

"A molecular detonator!" a voice echoed from behind them. The three men turned to stare at Wesley Crusher.

"It's a Romulan device," Wes went on to explain. "It relies on the half life of a radioactive element."

"In that case I calculate that we have five days before the device destroys the Enterprise," Spock said.

"Mr. Scott, can you disconnect it?" Kirk snapped.

"I dinnae even ken how it works. I wouldn't know where to start."

"Mr. Spock?"

"I agree with Mr. Scott. Without understanding the device we shouldn't attempt to remove it."

"Then I want the two of you to work on it until you do."

"Understood, sir."

"Sir." Wesley spoke up again, without really meaning to. "I think I know someone who can do this without the risk of having unskilled people tampering. No offence, sir," Wes amended when he saw Mr. Spock raise an eyebrow, "but this could blow up in our faces, literally."

"Who? Yourself?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir. There's a family friend on Starbase 16. If I'm right he should have someone with him who's an explosives expert."

Kirk looked at Wes with suspicion

written all over his face.

"Sir, trust me... please."

Kirk crossed to the communicator. "Kirk to bridge. Mr. Chekov."

"Aye, sir," the navigator replied.

"What's our ETA at Starbase 16?"

"Four days at warp 4"

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov. Increase speed to warp 6." Kirk turned back to the others. "That's cutting it fine. Mr. Spock, you and Scott examine the device but don't tamper with it. You may have to pull it out anyway."

"Aye, sir."

"Wesley, come with me."

Wes breathed a sigh of relief as he was led out of engineering. Despite knowing the reputations of Spock and Mr. Scott, Wesley realised that they might not be able to disable the twenty-fourth century device without destroying the Enterprise. He wasn't sure that between them he and Geordi could work it out but he reckoned that they had a better chance. He only hoped that Captain Picard and Geordi La Forge had made it to Starbase 16.

Kirk led the young man through the corridors towards his quarters. It was time to confront the boy. So many things just didn't add up. Kirk didn't say a word as he waved Wesley towards the chair and faced him across the desk.

"This has gone on long enough, Mister. I suggest you tell me exactly who you are."

"Sir... Jim, I can't tell you. I'm under orders. But I *am* say that I'm a

Starfleet officer and I was sent here because of a possible Romulan threat to the Enterprise."

"I'm supposed to believe that? You have fed us nothing but lies since you came on board. In case you haven't noticed, they don't make kids Starfleet officers."

"Captain, all I'm asking you to do is to trust me until we reach Starbase 16."

"Report to Mr. Spock. Tell him all you know about this type of device."

"Sir?"

"Wesley, you could have blown up this ship ten times over since you've been on board. But when this is over I would appreciate the truth. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Now get out of here."

As soon as the coast was clear Kirk left his cabin in search of Dr McCoy and a glass of Saurian Brandy. Maybe he was going soft in his old age, but he had a compulsion to trust this young man, whatever his name turned out to be. McCoy would definitely have something to say on the subject. But his ship was in danger and Kirk had a hunch that Wesley was not the threat.

McCoy raised an eyebrow when Kirk entered sickbay, but he poured two glasses of brandy and let Kirk sit down before speaking.

"Do you think it's wise to let that kid run about the ship?" the Doctor asked.

"I don't think so, Bones, but what am I supposed to do? At least if he's

under Spock's eye he can't do much damage."

"Jim he could have sabotaged your ship!"

"Why now? Why not before?"

"I suppose you're right."

"I'm the Captain."

"Yes, sir!" McCoy snapped off a salute, bringing a smile to Kirk's face.

"Bones, did he say anything to you which might indicate where he came from?"

"I couldn't understand half of what he was babbling about."

"What exactly did he say about the Guardian?"

"Hmmmm... Something like, 'Captain, I can't go through the Guardian alone.' Then he started mumbling about his parents."

"Could he be a time traveller?"

"Well, he's Human all right, but there's still the lack of those viruses... It's possible, I suppose."

"While he's busy with Spock I think I'll pay a visit to his quarters."

"Jim, you can't just go through his belongings!"

"Okay, you're right. I'll make it official. I'll get Security to do it. Kirk to Crusher..."

Jack Crusher felt a little self conscious as he used the security override

to gain access to Wesley's quarters. The room was painfully tidy - quite unlike the room of a normal teenage boy. Crusher was beginning to think that Wesley was not a 'normal teenager' by any stretch of the imagination. There was a distinct lack of personal belongings. Uniforms hung neatly in the cupboard. A few off-duty clothes lay in a drawer, and some computer journals were stacked by the terminal. Crusher scanned each one of them briefly but they consisted of computer journals, borrowed from Mr. Scott no doubt.

It wasn't until he pulled out a drawer that he found it. A badge, made of what looked like gold. It was a replica of the Enterprise insignia, backed by an oval. Crusher tapped it experimentally; it let out a low beep. Crusher grinned to himself as he pinned the badge inside his uniform. Crossing to the communicator he activated it. "Crusher to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"Nothing to report, Jim."

"Okay, thanks anyway. Kirk out."

The Enterprise slid into dock at Starbase 16 without ceremony. Captain Picard watched her, comparing her with his own vessel. She was not the ship he knew and loved. Just seeing the ship allayed some of his fears. If the Enterprise was here then there was a good chance that Wesley Crusher was safely on board. Picard realised that he and La Forge would probably have to wait some time for Wesley to appear. With the ship on full alert the crew was unlikely to be granted shore leave.

Several hours and a couple of hot baths later, Captain Jean-Luc Picard and

his Chief Engineer arrived at the bar which the Captain had specified. The bar had a relaxed atmosphere which reminded both officers of Ten Forward. In one corner there was the usual bunch of adolescent males who were engaged in a competition to see who could get drunk the fastest. Apart from that the place was more or less empty. Picard called the waitress over.

"Excuse me, could you tell me when the Enterprise is due to disembark?"

"Couple of hours, I guess. You new crew members?"

"Something like that."

"I thought you had that Starfleet look about you. I can usually tell."

The waitress unloaded two drinks from her tray and set them before Picard and La Forge.

"We didn't order these," Picard protested.

The waitress grinned.  
"Compliments of the house."

Picard took a sip from his glass. It was Earl Grey tea, hot.

"Well, sir?" Geordi La Forge asked his Captain for the tenth time.

Picard shook his head and replied, "No sign yet, Commander."

Geordi picked up the worry in Picard's voice. "Maybe he's still on duty; he may not have got shore leave yet," the Engineer reasoned.

Picard didn't answer but let his eyes rove round the room once more. This

time he was rewarded by the sight of Wesley Crusher entering the bar, flanked by two men who could only be James T. Kirk and his First Officer. Picard stood and waved, but Wesley had already spotted his crew mates and was making his way towards them.

"Captain Picard, Geordi." He nodded briefly. "These are Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock... from the Enterprise."

The two Captains eyed each other suspiciously. Wesley shifted nervously from foot to foot, not quite knowing what to say. Kirk eventually took the seat opposite Picard, pushing aside his suspicions.

"My ship is in trouble, Picard," he said, "and Wesley here tells me that you can help."

"In what way?" Picard asked.

"Spock..."

"There is a sabotage device of Romulan design linked to the matter-antimatter regulator of the warp engines," Spock informed them. "The emanations from the detonator indicate that the Enterprise will be destroyed in 12.4 hours."

"It's a molecular detonator, Geordi," Wesley interrupted.

"Romulan?" the Chief Engineer asked.

"I think so."

"Tricky. Those things tend to blow up in your face if you don't treat them right."

"That's why I didn't let them remove it."

"Can you remove the device, Mr. La Forge?" Picard asked.

"I need to take a look, but I should think so," Geordi decided.

"Excuse me," Kirk broke into the conversation, "but this is my ship we're talking about. What exactly do you plan to do to it?"

"Mr. La Forge here thinks that he can remove the device," Picard explained.

Kirk looked curiously at the VISOR. "What's that?"

"You could call it a visual enhancer," Picard said carefully.

Kirk grunted. "How do I know that you won't cause more damage?"

"Let my officers work on your ship and take me as hostage."

"Hostage?" Kirk asked.

"Yes. Put me in your brig. If they look as if they are going to damage the Enterprise, then you still have me."

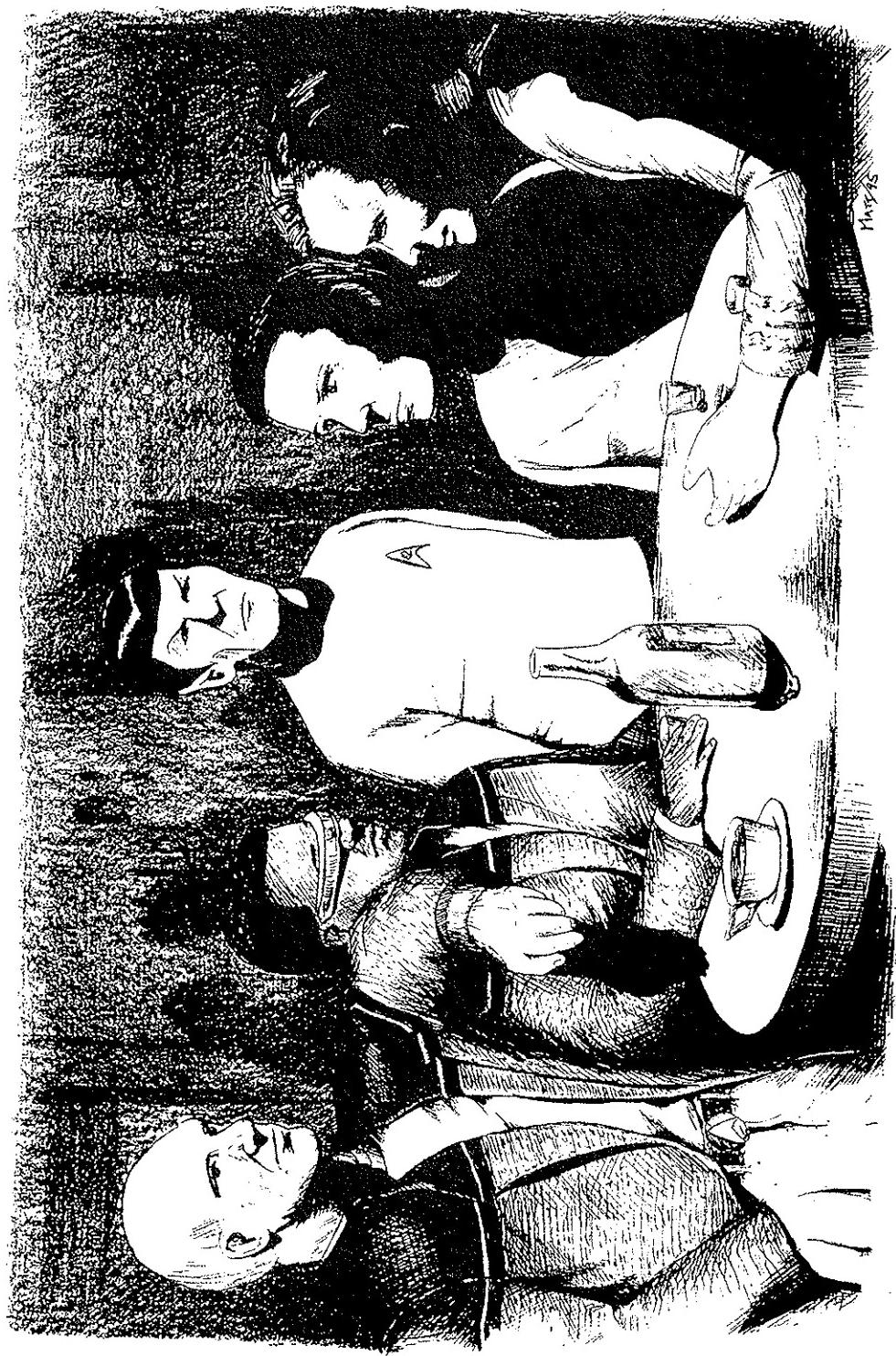
"And if they don't manage to remove the device?"

"Then I'll be as dead as the rest of you."

"Very well. Mr. Spock, call the Enterprise and get Mr. Crusher and a security team over here."

At the sound of Crusher's name Picard glanced sharply at Wes, who nodded grimly.

The Romulan strolled confidently through the corridors of the Starship



Enterprise nodding and smiling at acquaintances, exchanging cheery words with the security guards. He'd been on board long enough now to raise no suspicious looks wherever he might wander. Indeed, redshirts were welcome all over the ship. He had worked hard to establish a good relationship with the Federation crew, however personally distasteful he had found it.

Avoiding being dragged into conversation with the guards posted around engineering, he made his way inside. After the security alerts of the past few days he wanted to make sure that his device was still functioning correctly. He was sure that Dr. Crusher's brat from the Enterprise had been the one to spot it, although it would have been naive to expect that it would remain undetected; Mr. Scott was too careful an engineer for that. However, if someone else had discovered the device they would have tried to disable it and the Romulan's mission would have been complete. Now the destruction of Starbase 16, as well as the Enterprise, was almost assured. The mission was turning out to be more successful than he had ever dared to believe. For a start, time travel was a risky business; even the Guardian hadn't been able to send him back to the exact temporal location. He'd been extremely unlucky to be tracked down by the crew of the future Enterprise.

Mr. Scott was kneeling in front of the intermix chamber. He looked like he'd been in the same position for days rather than just hours. Tricorder in his hands, he was going over the data again. He suddenly became aware of the figure standing behind him.

"And what can I do for you, lad?" Scott asked sharply.

"I just wondered how you were getting on," the Romulan replied, "and if

there was anything I could do to help while Mr. Spock's on the Starbase?"

"Not really, but thanks for the offer. I think I know how to get the bloody thing off but the Captain has ordered me not to try."

"Why? I mean, if you can save the ship - ?"

"I know, I know, but Jim Kirk's mind works in mysterious ways. It's best not to question him."

Mr. Scott turned away to continue his examination. As he did so he felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck. He wondered what it was as numbness spread through his limbs and he slid to the ground.

Jack Crusher was just leaving sickbay when he got the call to transport down to Starbase 16. He swore under his breath as he ran to the transporter room. This was all he needed - a bomb on the Enterprise, followed by the discovery of Scott slumped over his equipment... now a prisoner to take into custody, all following on from the transfer of the Romulan Commander to Starfleet authorities.

He beamed directly to the street outside the bar, rather than the Starbase reception area. Being Chief of Security allowed him to do this. In fact, being Chief of Security allowed him to do a lot of things that were normally off limits to ordinary personnel. He entered the bar and spotted Kirk, sitting in the far corner with Spock, Wesley and two strangers. As he got closer he began to recognise the elder of the two.

"Mr. Crusher," Kirk said, "kindly escort Captain Picard to secured quarters.

Mr. Spock will take the others to engineering."

"Aye, sir. But there have been other developments which you should be aware of," Crusher replied with some concern.

"Brief me later."

"Yes, sir. Crusher to Enterprise, two to beam up."

Picard took a long look at Crusher when they stepped down from the transporter platform. He was not the greying middle-aged man who had fooled the Captain so easily aboard the Enterprise. This form of Jack Crusher was in his mid-twenties, looking as he had done when Picard had first known him. The gold ring on his left hand indicated that he was married to Beverly. Obviously the Romulan had undergone a second change of features to obtain that effect.

"Well, Jean-Luc?" Crusher turned to Picard when they reached the assigned quarters. "What happened to your hair, or was it just the effect of working with me for five years?"

Picard took a step backwards. His mouth felt dry. Wesley had indicated that this was the Romulan spy - however, the previous comment had been so typical of Jack Crusher.

"Come on, don't tell me that old phaser brain has finally run out of things to say!"

That settled it! There was no way that any Romulan spy network could have discovered that particular nickname. There was however still one more test for Picard to make.

"You know me, Jack, you could never take me anywhere - "

" - except back to apologise."

The two men grinned at each other, but questions were still running through Picard's mind as the personality of the Captain of the Galaxy Class Enterprise reasserted itself. If this was Jack Crusher, then who had planted the sabotage device? Obviously the Romulan was on board somewhere disguised as one of the regular crew complement.

"So the Federation have roped you in on this one too," Jack Crusher was saying, "obviously some years after me."

"Not exactly," Picard said.

"Maybe you can explain this." Crusher produced the communicator pin he had taken from Wesley's quarters and handed it to Picard.

"Wesley's communicator," Picard told him. "Where did you find it?"

"In the kid's quarters. He's a weird kid - bright, but weird."

Picard fought the urge to laugh. Crusher obviously had not guessed the truth about Wesley's background, but now was not the time to explain. They had more important things to discuss, like what they were going to do about the Romulan threat to the Enterprise.

"Geordi," Wes hissed as they were led out of the transporter room, "we can't let the Captain go off alone with a Romulan."

"He's not," Geordi whispered back.

"What?"

"He looks Human to me." Geordi tapped his visor. "There's a difference in body temperature that shines out like a beacon."

"Then... then... Damn!"

"What is it?"

"I've got to speak to the Captain."

"Wesley, no!"

"But - "

"Our first priority is to save this ship, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Geordi saw Wesley hang his head in disappointment and worry. The Chief Engineer hated to do this to the boy but history demanded that they sort out this problem with the Enterprise; Wesley's personal problems had to take a back seat. Geordi only hoped that he could remove the device safely. Molecular detonators were tricky things - not many of them had been reported in Federation space. La Forge had never personally had to deal with one.

"Have you got the tricorder?" he asked.

"Yes."

"We won't use it unless we have to."

"Mr. Spock will have a twenty-third century alternative."

"Here you are, gentlemen," Kirk interrupted their whispered conversation. "Do your worst."

Geordi crossed to the open inspection panel and stuck his head inside. He spotted the device

immediately. Explosives and detonator were separated by less than 1 cm of air. Remove the detonator, the source of alpha particles, and the radiation would no longer penetrate the explosives, causing the warp engines to explode. When the source deteriorated the same thing would happen. The explosive device would be easy enough to remove - it was fastened by simple magnetic clamps - but the detonator appeared to be adhering to the support struts.

"Mr. Spock, can I borrow the tricorder for a moment?" Geordi asked the Vulcan who stood over them.

"Of course," Spock replied, handing the instrument to La Forge.

"This looks like a primitive polyurethane resin - what do you think, Wes?"

"Yes... water endcapped by the looks of things." Wesley didn't sound very interested in the tricorder readings. "Materials like that haven't been used since the development of molecular adhesives."

"I know, but they're still effective. We have several choices. We could use a phaser..."

"But that would probably cause a containment breach. We could drill it?"

"The vibrations might set it off. I think we'll have to try dissolving the resin. Wes, can you run down to the science labs and pick up any polar organic solvents that you can find."

"Aye, sir."

Wesley left engineering at a run, after receiving permission from Mr. Spock.

"What is your solution?" Spock asked La Forge.

"If you have the correct probe I can remove the explosive device without any problem. It's just a matter of disrupting the electromagnet. The trick is going to be maintaining the distance between the detonator and the device until we can beam it off the ship. But I don't think that you needed me to tell you that."

"True, but Wesley seemed to be adamant that we didn't try to remove the device."

"If you haven't seen one before it can be tricky. I guess Wes just wanted to make sure that it was dismantled correctly." Geordi knew the real reason that Wesley had told Kirk not to touch the device. He had obviously wanted an excuse to get Captain Picard on board now the suspicion of Romulan sabotage was confirmed.

"Will he be all right?" Kirk demanded of McCoy.

"He had a hairline fracture at the base of the skull, but Scott's got a robust constitution. He should be back on duty within a week."

"We know we've got a saboteur on board, but when they start attacking my crew it gets personal. Spock said that the device could have been planted months ago. Someone obviously got worried when we found it."

"I suppose that you've no idea who?"

"Not yet, but the ship is sealed off. He's not getting anywhere."

Wesley dashed along the corridors of the Enterprise fully intending to carry out La Forge's orders, but his mind refused to co-operate. His route did not necessarily take him past the Security section and when it did he did not necessarily have to stop; but his feet seemed to slow down of their own accord. He knew that Picard was in the secured quarters; Wesley wanted to break in and scream at the Captain. He desperately hoped that Picard had not told Jack Crusher that his son was on board. All his life Wes had wanted to know his father, but now, when it came to it, he was terrified. He'd thought he'd been scared when he faced the Borg, the Romulans, even Q. This was a different type of fear. In all those other situations he'd been able to think. Hell, his ability to think clearly in a tight situation had saved the Enterprise on more than one occasion.

Wesley leant against the wall and wiped his arm quickly across his eyes. This was no good, he was going to have to help Geordi.

"Wesley?" Bob Morrison's voice interrupted Wesley's thoughts. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," Wesley croaked, a part of him wondering what Morrison was doing in that part of the ship, away from his bridge station.

"Have you been down to engineering recently?"

"I've just come from there."

"Have your friends managed to remove that device yet?"

"No... Bob, how do you know about that?"

"Come on, the ship's grapevine is buzzing."

Wesley looked curiously at Morrison. He knew for a fact that Kirk had enforced a security blanket. Even so, the news that Geordi and Picard were on board couldn't have circulated that fast. With a cold feeling Wes suddenly noticed that his friend was armed.

"Shouldn't you be on duty?" Wesley asked.

"Damn, yes, I'll be late."

Morrison made no effort to move, however. Wes decided to carry out his orders and started to walk away.

"Where are you off to?" Morrison asked.

"Science labs."

"You're going to remove the device?"

"Of course. Bob - tell me, why are you wearing a phaser?"

Morrison started to laugh as he drew the weapon. "I'd heard that you were a smart kid, Crusher!"

"Bob?"

"I think that you'd better come with me up to the bridge."

"I don't think so... *Captain Picard!*"

Wesley ended his sentence with a yell, hoping, fairly desperately, that Picard would hear. Faster than Wes would have thought possible, Morrison crossed the distance between them, striking him across the side of the head. As he was slammed against the wall Wesley yelled again, trying to make as much noise as possible. He was grabbed from behind and dragged bodily towards

the nearest turbolift. Wesley was now seeing double and he could distinctly feel blood trickling down the side of his face. As the lift doors slid shut, Wes glimpsed Picard and Crusher in the corridor.

"Wesley!" Picard shouted, as he saw Wesley dragged into the lift. "Merde!" he swore.

"Crusher to Security!" Jack had moved to the wall communicator. "Track the lift in turboshaft 3. Where's it heading?"

"Bridge level, sir," the anonymous voice replied.

"Who's on duty?"

"Just the low watch crew - Morrison, Chapel and Bartholomew."

"Thanks. Crusher out." Crusher glanced at Picard. "It was Morrison in the lift with the kid."

"That means that he was the intruder. How long's he been on board?" Picard wanted to know.

"Some time, I believe. Crusher to Kirk."

"Kirk here," came the reply.

"We have a major problem. Lt Morrison was our Romulan intruder. He's on his way to the bridge and he's got the kid as a hostage."

"Meet me in engineering. Kirk out."

Wesley was pushed onto the bridge with enough force to cause him to stumble against the bridge rail and fall to the ground. The two officers on duty half rose in their seats; Morrison calmly shot

them. He then walked over to where Wesley lay winded.

"Get up," Morrison snarled. Wes decided not to argue and pulled himself to his feet, wiping the blood from his eyes on his sleeve.

"Go over to engineering and cut off the bridge from the auxiliary control system," Morrison ordered.

"No," Wesley refused.

"Fine." Morrison raised his hand and struck Wesley across the mouth. Wesley groaned as his face made contact with the floor for the second time in thirty seconds. Spitting blood, Wes climbed to his feet; there was no point in getting himself killed when he could still be of help to Captain Picard.

"Okay, okay," he said and moved over to the engineering station. After studying the appropriate controls for a few seconds he made the necessary adjustments. He was conscious of Morrison checking his every move. Turning to face the Romulan once more Wesley asked, "What now?"

"I think it's time for you to repeat your trick with the navigation systems. Tie it into helm control, and move that."

"Aye, sir," Wes muttered.

He dragged Bartholomew's body away from the helm controls and removed the panelling to expose the wiring. As he climbed underneath he desperately tried to think of a way to send a signal to let the others know that he was okay. Surreptitiously, he took the tricorder from its hiding place and connected it to the internal communications system that ran through every bridge station. He didn't have any time to do anything but broadcast a

regular repeating signal and hope for the best.

"The bridge is cut off," Spock acknowledged, "and we cannot override using the auxiliary control room."

"We've got to get up there," Kirk decided. "I won't let anyone fool around with my ship."

"We mustn't do anything that might jeopardise the boy's safety," Picard protested.

"He might be dead already."

"Wesley would get a message to us somehow," Picard told them. "We've just got to give him a chance."

The five men were standing in engineering, around the warp drive system.

"Spock, can you disable the drive system? He may have control of the ship but we wouldn't be going anywhere," Kirk ordered.

"Very good, Captain."

"Too late," Geordi La Forge shouted from the monitor station. "The Enterprise is leaving Starbase 16, course 1632 mark 4."

"The Romulan Neutral Zone," Kirk said. "There are four hundred and twenty people on board this ship; I'm not going to risk them all. Jack, Spock, you're with me. We'll attempt to reach the bridge via the emergency walkway."

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," Picard said, making a grab for and successfully obtaining the Security Guard's phaser. Feeling slightly sick he

set the beam on wide stun and fired. Kirk and Spock did not have time to protest but Jack Crusher did.

"Jean-Luc? What the hell?"

"We can't let them risk their lives. History says that they didn't die here so we can't take that chance."

"But...?"

"I've got it!" Geordi interrupted excitedly, "There's an interference pattern emanating from the bridge. It must be Wes."

"How can you be sure?" Crusher protested.

"If there's one thing I've learned about Wesley Crusher, it's that he's always inventive."

"Did you say *Crusher*?"

"Don't you know... Captain?"

"Jack, I'm sorry, I didn't know how to tell you," Picard began.

"My son?" Jack asked quietly.

"Yes."

"You sent my son on a dangerous mission..."

"Jack."

"All the time he's been on this ship he's been acting oddly each time our paths have crossed. It wasn't just because he thought I was a Romulan spy. What happened to me, Jean-Luc?"

"Look, Jack, we know that Wesley is alive. I think we had better concentrate on making sure that he stays that way."

"Agreed," Crusher conceded.

"Geordi, how long have we got until that device explodes?"

"About eight hours."

"How long do you think it will take us to get to the bridge?"

"Roughly an hour to make our way up the emergency walkway. It's a long climb. There's also the dorsal Jefferies tube; climbing up there would take considerably less time, but it's a tight squeeze."

"I'll try and gain access via the emergency walkway, Jack?"

"Okay, Jean-Luc, I'll crawl up there," Crusher agreed.

"Mr. La Forge, concentrate on removing that device, and keep an eye on them."

Jack Crusher crawled into the confined space with more than slight trepidation. He'd always been slightly claustrophobic, and knowing that, below, there was a bomb waiting to blow them all to space dust didn't help. As for Picard's revelations about his son, Crusher didn't even want to think about it. *No wonder you thought he was weird*, he said to himself. *He probably takes after you*. Then there was the question of why Wesley was serving as one of Picard's officers. Starfleet didn't make kids into Ensigns or send them on dangerous missions. Okay, he was a smart kid, but was it fair to do this to him? Jack decided to deal with those problems when faced with them and not before.

As he crawled upwards he began to wonder why he'd volunteered for this

mission. Thinking back, he realised he hadn't specifically volunteered. The old admiral had specified him and he'd stepped forward like a good Starfleet officer.

"You've obviously got a death wish, Crusher," he announced to no one in particular, "and you've got to stop talking to yourself - do you want this ladder to think that you're crazy?"

Crusher couldn't quite get over the change that the years had brought about in his friend. How many years this man was older than the Picard Crusher knew was not possible to determine by looks alone. There was a change in the man that ran much deeper than mere external appearance. Jack guessed that his friend had experienced some personal tragedy and wondered what it could have been.

After half an hour Jack began to be thankful that he'd chosen the shorter route. His arms ached, his legs ached and the muscle he'd pulled while fencing with Mr. Sulu was really starting to throb. He couldn't be that far from the bridge level. What he was going to do when he got there was a mystery. Although armed, he was well aware that he might not have a chance to use the phaser without damaging something vital - or someone. He'd known his Captain - his own Captain - long enough to realise that he was meant to be a diversion. Picard must have some kind of plan in mind. He paused for a moment, wishing that he'd thought of bringing something to eat. Looking upwards he decided that he had about two more levels to climb.

"Stop thinking so much," Crusher told himself, "or the action's going to be over before you manage to haul yourself up this ladder."

The motion sensor on the bridge security board let out a high-pitched squeal, breaking the silence which enfolded the bridge. Morrison was seated in the command chair, his phaser trained on Crusher's back. Wes sat bolt upright, painfully aware of the bodies beside him.

"That sounds like the rescue party," Morrison laughed, as he stood and looked at the security monitor. "Clever, he's using the dorsal Jefferies tube. Open it for him - after all, it's only polite."

Not wishing to argue, Wesley did as he was bid. He was then told to move away again, back towards the viewscreen.

"Okay, come out of there!" Morrison yelled. "Come out of there or the kid gets it!"

There was silence; nothing moved. Morrison grabbed Wesley and pressed the phaser to the side of his head.

"I mean it," Morrison continued, his voice laden with icy calm.

"You don't think that they'd be that obvious?" Wesley gasped, struggling in the Romulan's grasp.

"Shut up. Call out."

"No... Aaargh!"

Wes screamed as Morrison twisted his arm further up his back. There was a sickening crack but Wesley refused to call out again. The Romulan pushed him away. Wesley leaned against the wall nursing his broken arm. He slid slowly downwards, willing himself not to throw up. There was someone in the Jefferies Tube, of that he had no doubt, and he hoped that whoever it was had the sense to stay there. Morrison was standing before the open access panel.

"There's no one there," Wes called

out again.

"I told you to shut up!"

Morrison moved away from the Jefferies Tube, turning towards Wes, whose foot lashed out, catching the Romulan unawares, kicking his legs from under him. Both men leaped for the phaser, which skidded across the floor. That bit smaller and faster, Wesley managed to get his good hand to it first. He was vaguely aware of Captain Picard and Jack Crusher emerging from opposite sides of the bridge. Fumbling with the weapon in his right hand, wishing for once that he wasn't left handed, he rolled onto his back and fired. The feeling of nausea swept over him again as Morrison dropped without another sound. Wesley dropped the phaser.

Wesley tried to scramble to his feet when he became fully aware of the presence of the other officers. He didn't quite make it - his left ankle wouldn't support him.

Crusher bent over the Romulan. "That phaser was set to kill," he said, standing up.

"I didn't mean to..." Wes began.

"You had no choice, Ensign," Picard told him. "More importantly, how are you?"

"I'll be okay, sir. My left arm is broken and I think my left ankle is twisted."

"Well, you look a real mess." Crusher grinned. "Hell of a place for a family reunion, Wes. Tell me, did you ever grow out of that habit of throwing your food up the walls?"

"Yes, you stopped feeding me until I ate properly."

"Let's have a look. Mmmmm... looks like your ankle's broken too. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Good, I don't think you're concussed. You don't marry a doctor without picking up a hint or two. Even so, we'd better get you down to sickbay."

Crusher helped Wes to his feet and supported his weight as he limped to the turbolift.

"You be okay, Jean-Luc?" Crusher asked as they got onto the lift.

"Yes, take care of your son, Mr. Crusher."

Picard sat at the helm and prepared to shut down the engines. Something was wrong; the helm appeared to be unresponsive. Picard activated his communicator.

"Mr. La Forge."

"Yes, sir."

"We have secured the bridge but there appears to be a problem with the helm control."

"The controls have been locked in some way. The problem's not down here, he must have done something at bridge level. Is there any way that you can get the information out of our Romulan friend?"

"Not possible I'm afraid. Have you managed to remove the explosive device?"

"Yes, that resin was tough to dissolve, but I got it off in the end."

"You'd better get up here."

"On my way, sir, but we're going to have some very angry people down here very soon. Someone's going to notice that the Captain's not around before much longer."

It took Geordi La Forge a couple of minutes to reach the bridge, to find that Picard had already left for engineering. He let out a low whistle as he surveyed the scene of destruction. Medical personnel were picking up the bodies and mopping up the blood. They looked at La Forge with some curiosity, but he strode onto the bridge confidently. If he acted like he was meant to be there people would automatically assume that he had some legitimate purpose.

The bridge was cleared fairly rapidly while Geordi took a long look at the helm control. He quickly sorted out the modifications that Wesley had made but the controls were still locked on course for the Romulan Empire at a warp speed that La Forge began to realise that this Enterprise could not maintain for much longer.

"La Forge to Picard."

"Picard here."

"I don't know what he's done but I reckon we've got less than thirty minutes before the engines shake themselves apart."

"Acknowledged." Picard deactivated his communicator and turned back to face an angry Captain Kirk.

"I think the time has come for the truth," Picard said.

"Come on, then," Kirk snapped. "This had better be good."

"Mr. La Forge, Wesley Crusher and I come from approximately one hundred years in your future."

To Picard's surprise Kirk's posture relaxed and he started to laugh. "I'm sorry," he said eventually, "but we'd already come to that conclusion."

"Indeed, more than one fact gave you away," Mr. Spock agreed.

"You are Starfleet officers?" Kirk asked.

"Yes," Picard replied, more than slightly taken aback.

"Which ship?"

"Would you believe the Enterprise?"

"As a matter of fact I would, but don't tell me any more. We have a responsibility to the future as you do to the past. Mr. Spock, report to the bridge and see if you can assist Mr. La Forge."

"Aye, sir." Spock left engineering.

"I think that you and I should visit sickbay. Wesley might have some more information."

The two Captains left the room, Kirk at a run, Picard at a fast walk. Somehow both managed to move at the same speed.

"What the hell?" McCoy exclaimed as Jack Crusher carried his son into sickbay. Wesley had fainted while the two were en route.

"Had an argument with a Romulan, but you should see the other guy," Crusher replied, gesturing towards Morrison's body which was taken past.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine."

"I know, he's got his mother's constitution. Dr. McCoy, I'd like to introduce you to my son."

"What?"

"You were right, Bones," Kirk interrupted as he arrived.

"Time travellers?"

"Yes. Now can you bring the kid round?"

"I'd recommend that he's allowed to wake up in his own time."

"Doctor, he might have information that's vital to the safety of the Enterprise," Picard said.

"He's right," Kirk agreed. "The Enterprise is flying out of control towards the Neutral Zone and we can't seem to track down the problem."

"All right, but don't blame me if he's not very coherent." McCoy took out his hypospray and gave Wesley an injection. A few seconds later Wes opened his eyes and looked around blearily.

"Mr. Crusher," Picard said.

"Yes, sir," Wes replied.

"Can you remember exactly which of the bridge control Morrison touched?"

"I modified helm controls according to standard emergency procedure and he must have set the security monitors to detect movement at all the bridge accesses."

"Anything else?"

"I don't remember... Wait, I think

he did something to the engineering station, but I didn't see what."

"Well done, Mr. Crusher. Picard to La Forge."

"Here, sir."

"Check the circuits on the engineering station. We'll be up in a moment."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk and Picard left sickbay, both running this time. As silence fell once more there was a very loud sneeze from the next bed. The three officers turned to regard the occupant. John Edwards smiled back, looking slightly sheepish. He was supporting two black eyes which clashed with his multicoloured shorts. It was pretty obvious as to why he was in sickbay.

"You are not to repeat anything that you've just heard," McCoy ordered.

"Yes, sir," Edwards replied.

"Now lie down and wait until I've patched up Mr. Crusher the younger."

Edwards did as he was bid, but not before whispering to Wes, "Never trust a man who doesn't like chocolate."

"You were lucky," McCoy told him. "That blow would have killed someone who was completely Human."

"Half Crinthian... tough skulls," Edwards went on to explain.

Mr. Spock gazed on as Geordi paced back and forth in front of the engineering console. La Forge always liked to talk his problems through, after which he found it

considerably easier to find a solution. As an audience, Spock proved to be almost as satisfying as Data.

"How can an overload in the engineering station cause a lock-out in helm and navigation?" La Forge was saying.

"And the unit remain fully functional?" Spock added.

The bridge was now manned with its full complement of officers. La Forge and Spock were taking up a small corner of the room that was operating with all of its normal quiet efficiency.

"Look at this, Spock!" La Forge pointed excitedly at the readouts on his tricorder.

"The current flow has increased."

"Exactly, setting up an interference pattern destructive to the helm control loop. But how?"

"Reducing the resistance of the controls, thus keeping the voltage the same, allowing the unit to operate normally."

"That's it, but where? I'm not familiar enough with these circuits to tell what's meant to be there and what's not."

"We really require the services of Mr. Scott but I believe that I have the necessary expertise."

"Be my guest."

Spock removed the inspection panel and climbed into the maze of wiring.

"There appears to be a large number of missing resistors," his voice floated back. "I don't know if I have time to retune the control loop."

"Where are you when I need you, Data?" Geordi prayed quietly.

"Is it possible to slow the Enterprise down?"

"I'll see. Mr. Chekov, what is our present position?"

"150 parsecs from Starbase 16."

"That should put us close to the Finar nebula. Can we steer the Enterprise into it?"

"I think so, sair."

"Do it. The friction on the warp field should slow us down. That should give us a little longer before the engines overheat."

The Enterprise turned onto its new course painfully slowly, only able to use the manoeuvring jets that were usually reserved for docking. La Forge didn't notice the two Captains stepping onto the bridge. Picard put his hand out to stop Kirk moving forward. He knew that La Forge was quite capable of handling the situation and didn't need any interruptions.

A fantastic array of colours burst onto the screen as the ship entered the nebula. Even at warp speed the density of the dust cloud was enough to begin to slow the great ship down.

"How's it going, Spock?" La Forge asked.

"I still require more time."

"Fire our thrusters along the line of flight; simple Newtonian physics ought to slow us down. Two minutes until engine failure."

"Hull temperature beginning to

increase," Sulu warned.

Kirk looked at Picard. "Do you think they can do it?"

"I have every faith in Mr. La Forge," Picard answered.

"But has Mr. Spock got enough time?"

"We're about to find out."

Mr. Spock pulled himself out of the conduit as Geordi yelled, "Disengage warp engines!" The Enterprise made a protesting sound as she was propelled out of warp.

Kirk stepped down onto the bridge. "My compliments, Mr. Spock, Mr. La Forge. Mr. Sulu, set a course for Starbase 16, full impulse speed."

"Wonder what they're talking about?" La Forge asked Picard. The four officers were in the bar at Starbase 16, but Crusher and his son were seated in one corner talking earnestly to one another. Picard shook his head as he took a sip of his drink. They were waiting for a ship to arrive and take Jack Crusher back to his own place in space and time. Picard assumed that the Guardian would take care of the return of himself and his officers. Jack and Wesley had been talking for some hours. Picard had been struck by the similarity between the two men. Then again Wes had never appeared to favour his mother in anything besides his extreme intelligence.

Crusher had realised that something was wrong with his personal future. Wesley's attitude during their early encounters had made that clear. It was obvious that Jack Crusher played no part in Wesley's later life. What actually

happened Crusher did not want to know, and he knew better than to ask. He was just glad to have the opportunity to know his son as a person rather than as a cute kid. He also began to understand why Picard had such faith in the young man's abilities.

"It's time," Picard reluctantly interrupted the conversation.

"Thanks, Jean-Luc. Wes, I want you to have this. Bev'll probably kill me, but..."

Jack took the ring off his finger and handed it to his son.

"Thanks Dad," Wesley replied simply.

"Look after yourself and your Mom."

"I will."

The two embraced briefly before Jack walked out of the bar without looking back.

Wes passed his hand over his eyes. "Okay, Captain," he said finally. "Let's go home."

Eighteenth birthday blues. 0300 hours and Wesley Crusher crawled back towards his quarters. It was a good thing that he'd only been drinking synthohol otherwise he would have been due for a sore head next morning, and he had to get up for bridge duty. It had been quite a party, even though his mother turned up. The fact that she arrived late in the evening, with Captain Picard, would have aroused Wesley's suspicions if he hadn't been feeling so wrecked.

*It was a good birthday, Wes thought to*

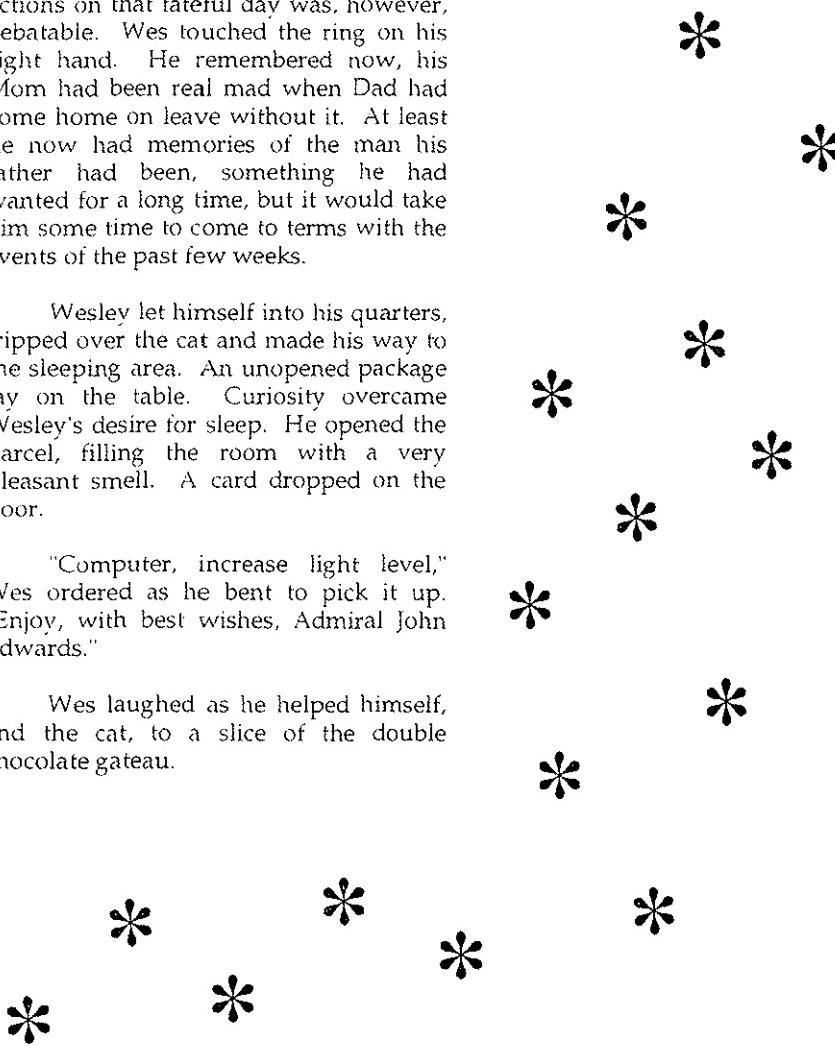
himself as he navigated the corridors of deck 10.

They'd been back on the Enterprise for a fortnight now and life was back to normal... almost. There was still so much that he wished he'd said to his father. There was, of course, that nagging doubt that he could have prevented the accident that had taken Jack Crusher's life. Whether anything Wesley could have said would have changed his father's actions on that fateful day was, however, debatable. Wes touched the ring on his right hand. He remembered now, his Mom had been real mad when Dad had come home on leave without it. At least he now had memories of the man his father had been, something he had wanted for a long time, but it would take him some time to come to terms with the events of the past few weeks.

Wesley let himself into his quarters, tripped over the cat and made his way to the sleeping area. An unopened package lay on the table. Curiosity overcame Wesley's desire for sleep. He opened the parcel, filling the room with a very pleasant smell. A card dropped on the floor.

"Computer, increase light level," Wes ordered as he bent to pick it up. "Enjoy, with best wishes, Admiral John Edwards."

Wes laughed as he helped himself, and the cat, to a slice of the double chocolate gateau.



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